

interzone

DECEMBER 2000

NUMBER 162

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Alexander Glass

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interview



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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

DECEMBER 2000

Number 162

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From Two Newer Readers

Dear Editors:

I live in Australia (Sydney) and have for a while been trying to find *Interzone*. I'm a big fan of Greg Egan and his style of ultra-hard science fiction – I find his perspectives on science, philosophy, mathematics and even politics are just always spot-on. I've certainly always read a lot of sf, from my Dad's old Asimov, Heinlein (his weird politics always confused me when I was young), E. E. "Doc" Smith, all the classics, etc, to more recently Egan, Neal Stephenson, Jeff Noon, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling... But other than those recent names, I wasn't that aware of *really* good current science fiction.

So when I was overseas touring with my band in July-August I found a large number of back-issues of *Interzone* in London's New Worlds on Charing Cross Road, and then more at Transreal Fiction in Edinburgh. I've had nothing but joy from reading all those issues – numerous from this year plus many from further back. Plenty of thought-provoking, interesting and moving stories, and the criticism is well-written and thoughtful.

I've discovered anew my passion for sf through *IZ* I must say. Finding Greg Egan's stuff a couple of years ago was a start – here's science fiction that really engages with cutting-edge science and so many other issues – and through *IZ* and links from it I have found out about many more fantastic current authors – to name a few: Paul J. McAuley, Brian Stableford, John Meaney, Simon Ings, Kathleen Ann Goonan (actually I knew about her earlier, but I consider her one of the best around at the moment), Paul Di Filippo and Alastair Reynolds (and through his excellent website – <http://members.tripod.com/~voxish/Home.html> – others



INTERACTION

such as Linda Nagata).

It was therefore no longer any problem for me to dole out the pounds sterling (despite the woeful Australian exchange rate) for a subscription to *IZ* when I got home, and I can't wait to receive my first issue!

Peter Hollo

raven@fourplay.com.au

Dear Editors:

While renewing my sub after my first year as an *Interzone* subscriber, I'd just like to say I particularly enjoyed Zoran Zivkovic's stories – the metaphors of "The Window" (*IZ* 152) and the dark whimsy of "The Train" (*IZ* 157). Tanith Lee's "La Vampiresse" (*IZ* 154) had real bite (sorry), and I was pleased to come across the millennial flavour of Ian Watson's "The Descent" (*IZ* 150) and

James Lovegrove's "Terminal Event" (*IZ* 150) – I suppose I was gratified to find that the imaginations of scientifically-bent writers were not immune to the fever. The Michael Moorcock issue (*IZ* 151) was welcome, and Gary Westfahl's articles succeeded in being controversial and funny. I'd have liked to have voted for my favourites in the most recent story-poll, but hadn't read the entire twelve issues of the previous year, so didn't think that would be entirely fair.

Dylan Dykins

Mold, Flintshire, Wales

Defending Alastair Reynolds

Dear Editors:

I was puzzled by Dave Cooper's letter (*Interzone* 160), since my response to Alastair Reynolds's story "Hideaway" was to note an exciting, imaginative and entertaining writer and to resolve to buy a copy of his novel *Revelation Space* at the earliest opportunity. It was the story and the idea that appealed to me: the "hard science," of which Dave Cooper makes such heavy weather, I perceived as diverting wind-down dressing.

Isaac Asimov by contrast, of whom he approves, I remember as dreadfully dull. Hari Seldon and warmed-over Toynbee... yawn. If millennia of the future have such a poverty of novelty in them, mankind will surely expire from boredom. And those bloody "Three Laws of Robotics" – where did they come from? Better stay clear of Greg Egan, Dave, to whom I was also introduced by *Interzone*, to my deep gratitude.

As for Chris Gilmore's politics, good grief! Even if I had supported a war to restore the tinpot despotism of the Emir of Kuwait, I think I would have found Chris's casual justification of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi casual-



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ties cross and insensitive. I have no sympathy for Saddam Hussein, but I cannot say that I feel the territorial integrity of the brutal, corrupt, feudal dictatorship of the House of Saud worth defending either.

Chris may feel that the real issue is one of militant opposition to acts of aggression in violation of international law. Such a claim would be more convincing if it applied to American allies and clients, such as Israel, or if invasion and sustained savage repression by Indonesia in East Timor had met with more than a token international response. The rogues' gallery of tyrants installed and maintained for decades by American, British and French foreign policy – Bokassa and Mobutu in central Africa, Suharto in Indonesia, Pinochet or Somoza in Latin America – surely represent more than “mistakes” and do not inspire any confidence in the disinterestedness or morality of western foreign policy.

I remember a couple of years ago in Brussels visiting an exhibition on Belgium's imperial past in the Congo. What was striking about it was not so much that it failed to refer to the routine amputations and floggings employed to apply discipline to the rubber collectors, which among other things made this one of the most infamous episodes of colonial history. It was the fascinating contemporary propaganda depicting courageous Belgian troops driving off the Arab slavers and bringing the benefits of Christian civilization. In short, Belgian involvement was presented as, and doubtless widely believed at the time to be, a humanitarian intervention. A sceptical eye should always be brought to bear on professed humanitarianism when it is invoked to justify violence on a large scale.

Chris is entitled to his views, of course – as I am to mine. Science fiction however is a speculative genre, much of the appeal of which is that it implicitly criticizes, or mocks, the contingent and absurd elements of pre-vailling social reality, by posing the question: “What if...?” It therefore has an inherent disposition to radicalism. If Chris chooses to appeal to axioms of presumed virtually universal appeal, drawn from his right-wing political views, as arguments in his reviews, then his criticism will be the poorer for it. He will also continue to sound like Star Commander Blimp.

David Holland
London

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Keith Roberts

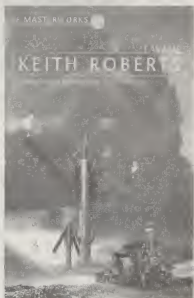
(1935-2000)

We were saddened to hear of the death of Keith Roberts on 5th October 2000. He had been very ill for a number of years, but it was still a shock to hear he had died at the age of 65. A highly individualistic and profusely talented author, he first made his reputation in the mid-to-late 1960s in the pages of *Science Fantasy*/*Impulse* and *New Worlds* (for both of which he also drew covers), and went on to write such memorable books as *Pavane* (1968) and *The Chalk Giants* (1973). Along with Angela Carter and John Sladek (both of whom were slightly younger), he is one of three notable writers who had stories in the very first issue of *Interzone* (Spring 1982) and who have now passed away.

David Langford wrote a fine tribute to Keith for Amazon.com UK, in which he said: “Roberts was a uniquely English fiction-writer whose work repeatedly celebrated the geography, legend and poetry of southern England... [He] was that very English figure, the crabby genius who can sometimes be impossible to get on with. Many British reviewers, and no doubt publishers, still wince at the memory of blistering letters from the great man – although a few critics were equally staggered by his unexpected praise and generosity... It's truly a shame that he didn't live to see publication of the Masterworks reissue of *Pavane*, one of the sf greats that will always come into print again: a stately, unforgettable haunting dance through history that might have been and a vision of England that is eternal.”

Although he was unable to carry on writing in his final years, new work by Keith Roberts continued to be published, the last to appear during his lifetime being the short novel “Drek Yarman” – written some years earlier and linked to the “Kiteworld” stories first published in *Interzone* in the 1980s – which was serialized in the new magazine *Spectrum SF* (issues 1-3, February, April and July 2000).

David Pringle



Cover by Jim Burns for the latest reissue of Keith Roberts's finest work, *Pavane* (Millennium, £6.99).

More Points for Chris Gilmore

Dear Editors:

I found Chris Gilmore's review of the excellent *Punktown* by Jeffrey Thomas in *IZ* 160 a little baffling. I know that reviewers like to top and tail their comments to give context and focus, but taking exception to the name of the press is really pushing it isn't it?

He begins the review, “When a publisher chooses a name like ‘Ministry of Whimsy’ it's a safe bet that he's publishing crap.” Even though he goes on to give the book a deservedly good write-up, the opening comment is not only plain insulting, it's totally irrelevant to the book (or any book) under scrutiny.

Okay, so the name of the publisher doesn't strike a chord with him. So what? Will he also start taking issue with other publishers? For example (at face value at least) what on earth does “Little Brown” signify?

Neil Williamson
Glasgow

Dear Editors:

It was with great amusement that we at the Ministry read the following in Chris Gilmore's otherwise very complimentary review (*IZ* 160) of our latest release, *Punktown*: “When a publisher chooses a name like ‘Ministry of Whimsy’ it's a safe bet that he's publishing crap.” Our publishing company was founded in 1984 and takes its name from the ironic Ministries found in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As such an association would suggest, we believe the name has non-crapulous foundations. We're rather perplexed that Mr Gilmore would preface such a positive review with such a load of... well, crap, but would like to reassure him that as of tomorrow we will have changed our name to “Chris Gilmore's House of Crap.”

Jeff VanderMeer

The Ministry of Whimsy Press
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The Watcher's Curse

Alexander Glass

I kept my gaze on the mirror as my blood swirled and chuckled in the sink, a scarlet thread spiralling down into the dark. Blindly, I reached for the tap, spinning its quatrefoil of thumbs until the water stopped flowing. My reflection stared out at me from the glass, drawn and haggard, boasting a few days' growth of beard. I avoided its eyes, not wishing to see the look of reproach, or the black and purple stains of too many nights without sleep. Instead I kept watch on the empty room behind me: two cubicles, four urinals, chessboard tiles on the floor, ten year old graffiti on the walls. Grimy slits for windows, too narrow to crawl through. And the door, sporting a cluster of pale splinters where I had kicked it open, the body of the lock still clinging to the frame. I knew that Alice was standing guard behind it. I also knew that if Myerson found us, she wouldn't be able to hold him back.

I spared a glance for my injured hand. The cut was bloody, but shallow: a ragged bite from a barbed-wire tooth, the result of climbing over a fence to reach the station. No time to get a tetanus shot; the thought of something so normal, so everyday, was almost funny. I bound up the wound, gripping the tail of the bandage in my teeth as I tightened the knot.

My head was throbbing. My vision was distorted, the world shimmering, shivering, before my eyes. Hunger pecked at my stomach. Fear closed in around my throat.

"Benjamin." Outside, Alice was tapping at the door. It trembled at her touch. "Come on. We have to get going."

"All right." I was surprised how weak my voice sounded.

"Hurry," she said, and I recognized the note of urgency,

the sharpening of her words.

I finally found the courage to look my reflection in the eye, and immediately wished I hadn't. I wore that hunted look, the look that animals have when they know their time is almost up. When they know the hounds have caught the scent of their blood. My reflection attempted a smile, perhaps forgiving me for the mess we were in. He nodded grimly at me, then quickly turned away.

Outside, Alice stood with one hand fixed upon her hip, the other resting lightly on the station door: poised, ready to move in an instant. Having seen my face in the mirror, I knew I was in worse shape than she was; but then, I'd been running far longer than her.

Myerson had found me in Vienna. It was my own fault: I had strayed too close to a node. In more peaceful times, when the net was safe, it wouldn't have mattered; but with Myerson on the loose, his mind a maelstrom of power and fury, I should have known the danger. I knew the node was there, in the cemetery, the Zentral Friedhof; as I walked past the black iron railings at its edge, I could feel the pull, the weight of the node in my mind. I could sense the arcs around me, branching away: one to the east, curving towards Prague; one to the northwest, through to London and Reykjavik; one to the southwest, through Barcelona, and on across the Atlantic. Three ley-lines, as my father would have called them. Three ways for Myerson to reach me. But he'd been silent so long – it was almost three years since the Grey Man had taken him – that I had all but forgotten the danger

we were in.

When I glimpsed a sudden movement from the corner of my eye – a statue in the cemetery had turned its head to stare at me, its smooth, empty eyes glowing in the light of the street-lamp – I remembered at once. Spinning around, I watched the statue carefully for any other signs of life, but there were none. It gazed away toward the line of red light that spilled over the horizon, pretending it hadn't even noticed me. It had never really moved, of course. It was Myerson, shifting photons, playing one of his games.

I ran, then, hoping to reach a safe-house before he caught up with me. New Orleans was the safest, but it was too far away – even if I made it safely on to a plane, the chances of flying over a node in the Atlantic were too great. The old stronghold in Athens was all but abandoned; I doubted they could protect me. That left Scotland, and the monastery at Kirriemuir. I doubted they would be glad to see me, with Myerson at my heels; but I had nowhere else to go.

By the time I reached London it was obvious that I was in no state to make it to Kirriemuir alone. That was when I met up with Alice. She knew all the dead roads. She even had a route planned out. I knew I couldn't have got this far without her.

Now she took my hand and led me out of the station, on to the platform. The place was empty, the wild closing in, the trees around the red-brick building left to grow as they would. The tracks were flooded with weeds. A flimsy wire fence was all that held back the trees; their skinny arms nudged through the gaps, waving, beating the air in time to music only they could hear. In the late afternoon sunlight, it seemed a pleasant enough place to wait for a train. The next one would pass through here in about two hours: it was too long to wait. We could feel Myerson, moving closer every moment.

"How did he find us so quickly?"

Alice shook her head. "I don't understand it. I thought if we avoided London, stayed away from the major nodes... This place is supposed to be a blind spot. He must be using the ley-net – how else could he sense us? – but we ought to be invisible here."

She vaulted down on to the track, wading through the weeds, stepping delicately from sleeper to sleeper. I followed more clumsily, cursing as a bundle of nettles scratched and scraped at my jeans. I could sense the nearest nodes, though they were still some way off: one directly behind us, to the south; one to the north-east, and one to the north-west. We were headed due north, between those two nodes. At some point we would come to the ley-arc that ran between them; crossing it would be like tripping a spider's thread, and we would have to hope that Myerson wasn't close enough to react in time. Glancing over her shoulder at me, Alice bared her teeth in a grin. She seemed a lot more confident than I was. I'd already crossed over a dozen arcs since I left Vienna – Northern Europe is a busy section of the net – but it wasn't getting any easier.

A black arch of crumbling brick leapt over the track,

and as we passed into its shadow I began to feel uneasy. I closed my eyes for a moment, wincing at a sudden pain in my temple. The world was spinning slowly about; I looked up at the rotten belly of the bridge, and instinctively raised a hand to cover my face: the arch seemed to be tumbling towards me. A feeling of nausea sat in my stomach, like a stone.

Gradually, the feeling passed, but I was still disoriented. On the face of it, nothing had changed; but the node to the south seemed suddenly much closer than it should. I stared at Alice, slowly, reluctantly, beginning to understand.

"He's altering the structure of the ley-net," I said, my voice roughened by fear. "That isn't the node we could sense before. He's created a new node. Close your eyes: you can feel it, and the arcs that extend from it."

Alice stared at me, knowing I was right but not yet ready to accept the unbelievable. "How? How can he do that?"

I lifted my shoulders. "One thing at a time. Let's get away from here first, and worry about his abilities later. Okay?"

She wasn't listening. She wasn't even looking at me. Instead she stared past me, over my shoulder; and from the way her body had frozen still, I knew already what she could see. It was Myerson. I didn't want to look, but I looked anyway.

He was the same as he'd been three years before: muscular but running to fat, his mouth a flat line, lipless, in his jaw, his receding hair scraped back into a ponytail. All that had changed were his eyes. Where once a pair of dull, grey-green orbs had been, there were only empty holes, the skin around them torn and ragged, and still – or so I imagined – scabbed with dried blood. The Grey Man had taken his eyes, and his mind.

Somehow he'd overridden my timesense, so that I hadn't felt his presence ahead of me, hadn't known he was going to be there. He'd put up barriers between my mind and the future. Now the barriers came down, hard, and Myerson smiled that mocking smile of his, not slowing his pace for an instant as he came out of the shadow of the bridge. In that moment, I understood exactly what was going to happen. I saw it all, in the sharpest flash-forward I had ever experienced; and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

That is the Watcher's curse: the images we see with the greatest clarity are those which are preordained, which nothing can prevent. The image before me now was so clear that it seemed to slice into my mind, piercing my thoughts and pinning them to a particular point in space-time. I could hear Myerson's footsteps on the railway sleepers, like someone hammering at the door. I could hear the sound of my own breathing, and the scrape of Alice's shoes on the ground as she turned this way and that, searching for a way out. But I could already see what would happen when Myerson reached us.

He would stand there, for a moment, smiling, glancing from me to Alice, and then back to me. Without warning Alice would swing her body around and land a steely punch to his windpipe. As she moved, the soft black cloth of her skirt would whisper in the air. Myerson would

recover at once, hardly affected by the blow, his smile undimmed. He would reach out a hand, as if in mockery of the punch, and touch Alice gently on the cheek.

Then the flashforward was gone. Myerson was now only a few steps away from Alice, and I wished there were something I could do. But even as I willed my body to move, I saw her turn, drawing back her fist. It was too late.

I thought I heard someone screaming in the distance, but it was only a ringing in my ears. The world was growing dark, closing in on me, and I felt myself floating, falling. A final explosion of colour erupted behind my eyes, and then the world went away for a while.

When I came to, Myerson was gone. Alice lay on the tracks where she had fallen, blood seeping from a shallow graze on her temple. She had collided with a sleeper's edge as she fell. Myerson, for reasons of his own, had left me unharmed; but there was no telling what his touch had done to Alice. Her skin was warm. Her eyes were closed. I knelt down beside her, gathering her into my arms, rubbing her face close to my own. My vision blurred, and I realized I was weeping.

I felt a rhythm beneath the skin, faint and slow but definitely there. She was alive. My God. She was alive, unconscious, seemingly at peace – as if she had merely fallen asleep.

I wondered if she would ever wake up.

On a worn wooden bench, in a long, empty hallway, I sat waiting, staring at the ground. On the surface of the smooth, polished grey-green stone, I saw an oaken door swing open, and a tall, lean, balding man step through it. He stood there for a while, looking down at me. His hazy reflection folded its arms across its chest, and tapped its lips with a gnarled forefinger.

At last he said, quietly: "We can't find her."

I looked up sharply, a denial taking shape on my tongue. Then I swallowed it, and nodded, accepting the truth. Alice was gone. The Grey Man had her now. All that was left was a shell, a puppet in the Carrion Zone.

"This is what you might call an awkward situation," the man continued, shaping each word with care. "Kirriemuir is supposed to be a safe house. The node at its heart is well protected. The arcs that lead to it are bound with Pfeiffer gates. No information can enter. But we don't know enough about the Bodiless to be sure of our safety."

I knew what was coming.

"So you're going to move her out of here," I said, and waited for him to contradict me. He said nothing, but one side of his mouth curled up into what might have been a small, sad smile. After a time, he offered me his hand. "I'm Eric. You might have heard my name."

I nodded, cautiously, not taking his hand. Alice had mentioned him a few times when we had first met in London; I got the impression she had left Kirriemuir after a dispute over her methods. Or maybe she'd been thrown out, to preserve the security of the safe-house. Dad had mentioned him, too, before he died: muttered something about Machiavellian tendencies, which meant nothing to me at the time. That must have been when Dad had been part of the old guard, the spiritualists, the dowisers, the

harmless eccentrics. It was then that the Grey Man had first appeared, and a few of us had fallen into deep, deep sleep, never to wake, while their minds roamed the ley-net. The Bodiless, we called them now. They weren't human any more. The break from their bodies changed them somehow. That, and their sequestration by the Grey Man. Dad seemed to resent Eric and his generation for setting up the safe-houses, for the quarantines, and for all the other security measures. The truth was, that Eric was probably all that had saved us. If not for people like Eric, we might all be lost to the Grey Man by now. All the same, I couldn't quite bring myself to trust him.

"We aren't sure what to do," he admitted. "We don't think the Grey Man has her – there are no signs of it on the net – but we can't see why Myerson would have left her alone. Come to that, he wouldn't normally have left you alone."

"I've been wondering about that myself."

"There's something else," he said, and his teeth raked across his lower lip. "Alice is obviously in a Bodiless state. If her consciousness is anywhere, it's encoded in the ley-net. But of all the sleepers, the Bodiless shells we've found, none have brain activity quite like this. There's usually some neuronal activation, pseudo-random, as there might be in REM sleep. It's safe to say that while the Bodiless are roaming the ley-net, their bodies lie dreaming. What they dream about – and what a 'dream' is, with no real consciousness there to experience it – is anyone's guess."

"And Alice doesn't have this activity." I stared at him, my mouth turning dry, my body turning cold. "Is she in a coma state, then?"

"Not exactly. There is some activity, and not a random pattern. Very far from random, in fact. Every 14 seconds there's a wave of neural activity, always engendered at the same point – in the *corpus callosum*, where it shouldn't be happening at all – and always following the same progression. It lasts a fraction of a second each time. It never varies."

I shook my head, waiting for an explanation. Eric didn't have one; but he did have a theory.

"It's a regular pulse," he said, "like a lighthouse beam, or... Do you know anything about computers?"

"Not much."

"When two systems communicate, they first exchange signals that they're ready to send and receive data. It's called a 'handshake.' If one system sends out a handshake signal, and doesn't receive the appropriate response, it won't even attempt to transfer data. Not a single byte. Maybe the physical connection is at fault; maybe the other system is incompatible; maybe there's no one there at all. The computer doesn't care which. All it knows is that if it doesn't receive a reply to that first signal, it can't communicate."

"And what is Alice trying to communicate?"

"We can't be sure what this pattern of activation is. But I'll tell you what I think. I think she's waiting for a countersign."

"And what would supply the countersign?"

"Her mind. It's somewhere in the ley-net – that's where she fled, when Myerson found you. When the body senses

the mind nearby, she'll be able to transfer back. It's an ingenious solution."

I shook my head. "No. That can't be. Myerson's one of the Bodiless. If you were running from him, the ley-net would be the last place you'd go. That's why we had to avoid the nodes. That's why you set up the Pfeiffer gates around this place. As soon as Alice entered the net, he would have caught her."

Eric pursed his lips. "Perhaps he did. Perhaps she panicked, when she realized there was no other way out, and jumped into the ley-net. And then he would have caught her. But I don't believe that: if she was in such a hurry, how did she have time to set up the signal?"

"She might have had it set up already," I suggested. "She was careful. She had escape routes worked out from London to New Orleans, and to Athens, and to this place. She must have set up the signal as a final precaution – it could have kicked in automatically as soon as she jumped."

"Which suggests that she had the jump in mind along. It's a dangerous escape route: like diving into the sea to get away from the sharks."

"She wasn't in any hurry to get herself killed, or to give herself over to the Grey Man. So she must have known something we don't. Some way of slipping through the ley-net without being caught."

Eric shook his head. "Where would she go? Nowhere in the ley-net is safe."

I lifted my shoulders, miserably, and turned my gaze to the floor. Eric's reflection was smiling up at me.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't have an explanation, Benjamin. But I do have a theory. You know what Alice's speciality was. She was a Weaver. She had better control, better understanding, of the ley-net than anyone I've seen."

"There's never been a Weaver good enough to outmanoeuvre the Bodiless, or to outrun them."

"I don't think she needed to." His smile broadened. "I think she let someone else do it for her."

I opened my hands, waiting for the rest.

"The Dancers," he said. "They were her pet project. She'd been sending out signals for years, hoping to reach nonhuman intelligences in the net. The true Bodiless, not humans who have left their bodies behind, but creatures that never possessed them: creatures of pure information. Creatures with an understanding of the ley-net many orders of magnitude higher than our own. Creatures who can move through the arcs like quicksilver, not bound by the mental constructs that allow the Weavers to manoeuvre from node to node." He nodded emphatically. "The Dancers. She must have made contact at last."

I stared at him, hoping he was right, though my gut told me he could only be wrong. Slowly, the smile faded from his face, and I knew it was time for him to give me the bad news.

"Benjamin," he said heavily, "I have to protect this place. Given what you've told me, that may have become an impossible task – if Myerson can manipulate the shape of the net at will, if he can create new nodes and arcs – but this is a safe house, and I have a responsibility for it. You understand, don't you?"

I nodded. I knew what he was about to say, and I didn't need my timesense to tell me. There could only be one reason for Myerson to leave me unharmed. I was a carrier. The Grey Man had planted his seed somewhere in my mind, and unless I could rid myself of it, I would always be a danger to the others. I couldn't stay here any longer. It had been a kindness on Eric's part to let me stay so long. From now on, I couldn't return to the safe house, or enter any other safe house. Preferably, I shouldn't go near anyone at all. When the mindseed began to grow, my mind and my body would be gone. The Grey Man would have me.

"I understand," I said, and my voice came out as a whisper.

Eric offered me his hand again, and this time I shook it. He stood there, outside the room where Alice lay sleeping, and watched me walk away, along the hallway, and out to the monastery door. I stared at the ground beneath my feet, and my reflection stared bitterly back at me.

The door fell shut behind me.

I went back to London, back to Alice's house. I didn't expect to find anything; but a twinge from my timesense told me that was the way to go, that something was waiting for me there. I couldn't go home, and there was always a chance that Alice had left something behind, some clue to where she had gone, and why. I wasn't about to give up yet. I was too stubborn, or so Dad had always said. I'd been exiled, and Myerson had made me a Carrier – it was only a matter of time before the seed in my mind began to grow – but I managed to convince myself that if I could at least find Alice, everything would be all right. She seemed to know more than the rest of us – more than Eric or any of our other self-appointed leaders, and certainly more than me.

This time there was no need to follow the dead roads, and no point. Myerson wouldn't be searching for me any longer. I could cross the ley-net without fear. I could even cross the nodes. I took a fast train to London, and did my best to drink myself into a stupor on the way down; I'd decided I could allow myself that much self-pity.

When my head had cleared, I wandered through the cold, grey streets to Halfpenny Wynd, avoiding everyone I saw. Alice's place is in a blind spot, supposedly invisible to the Bodiless – though Myerson had been able to track us along the dead roads without too much trouble. By the time I reached the house, the rain had begun, hiding the city's face behind a thin, streaming veil. I climbed twelve steps up to the door, wiped the water from my face, and wondered what to do next. I didn't have a key. I didn't know anyone who did. If I had been a Shifter, like Myerson, I could simply have nudged the lock open with a thought, and walked in; but I wasn't. A single strand of ivy snaked down from the eaves, tenacious, but not nearly enough to bear my weight. As a last resort, I would have to break a window.

I closed my eyes, reaching out in my mind, but my timesense told me nothing, registering only a slight unease. It was still dampened by the alcohol in my system, I thought, so maybe I shouldn't expect too much of

it. With a philosophical shrug I found myself a convenient window, and glanced furtively about to make sure no one was watching. When I looked back, the door had swung open, and a girl with a streak of purple in her hair was standing there, leaning on the doorframe with her arms folded. I guessed her age at about 15, though something about her eyes made her seem older.

"You'll be Benjamin."

I nodded. "You recognize me?"

"Alice said you'd be coming. She gave me a pretty good description, though she didn't say you'd look so wasted. I'm Clara. Come on in."

She turned and walked away, all but vanishing into the gloom. I followed, dripping water on the bare floorboards, wishing I'd kept in contact with Alice after I'd left for Europe. I didn't know any of her friends; I didn't know this girl.

"So," she said, sinking into the sofa, swinging her feet up on to a stool, and folding her arms behind her head, "what do we do?"

I shook my head. "What did Alice tell you?"

"Not much. Not enough." She frowned. "I got a message through the net, tied to a seeker drone, asking me to come here and wait for you. That was a couple of days ago, and I can tell you it's been a boring couple of days."

"You're a Weaver?"

"Alice was training me."

I opened my mouth to reply, then shut it, surprised. Alice had never shown any desire to take on an apprentice before. That meant the girl had to be something special. "How much has she taught you?" I bit my lip. "Do you know anything about the Dancers?"

"Of course." Clara blinked, and looked away, to where the rain flooded down the windows. "You have to go deep to find them, but they're there. They're nothing like us, nothing like us at all. With practice, you can sense them even from the Carrion Zone – if you're near an arc, you can feel them swimming past. It sends a shiver up your spine. It doesn't feel like a human mind. Sometimes it feels like an animal, and sometimes..." She shook her head. "But you can't really understand how different they are, unless you go deep."

"Deep?"

"You transfer as much as you can into the ley-net, without breaking contact with your body. Anchor yourself by a thread, and pay that thread out as far as it'll go. Deep." She frowned. "Haven't you ever gone into the net?"

I lifted my shoulders. "I'm not a Weaver."

"But a Weaver could take you down. I could take you down."

"It's dangerous," I said, and then realized that it wasn't dangerous, not for me, not any more. The girl would still be a threat, though. The Grey Man was in there, and his servants, the Bodiless. The Dancers were in there, alien minds, unknown, maybe unknowable. And Alice, too, was down there somewhere.

A thought struck me. "How was Alice training you? We don't use the net. We haven't used it for years."

Clara lifted her shoulders. "The Grey Man didn't bother us."

"Alice had protection." I nodded, thinking I understood. "Eric was right. She had made contact."

"She didn't make contact," retorted the girl. "I did."

I gaped at her, dizzied by what she had told me. Yet it made sense. There were always some of us who could sense the Dancers better than others. Alice had tried to make contact with them alone, and failed; so she had found someone to help her, and that someone turned out to be a 15-year-old girl. Eric must have known; maybe Eric brought them together. That was why he was so confident that Alice had made contact at last. And it wasn't in his interest to tell me. Better if I didn't know – when the seed began to grow, the Grey Man would open my head and take out everything I had learned.

"We could go deep," Clara was saying. I could take you in. We could search for her. I can navigate the arcs pretty well. I can build all the constructs we need."

Once again, I stared at her. "Are you still protected?"

"No. I could only find them. I could never understand them. It was Alice they spoke to." She gnawed at her lip, not quite able to hide her resentment at being excluded from their understanding. "I haven't gone into the net since Alice disappeared. I've been too scared, without Alice, without the Dancers. But you're a Watcher. Your timesense could protect us."

"It can show us what's coming. That doesn't mean we can always stop it happening."

"Better than nothing," Clara insisted.

Still uneasy, I closed my eyes for a moment and tested the hours ahead.

I saw a huge, cold space, filled with darkness and echoes. I was there, and Clara was with me, though it seemed we had left our bodies behind. We were moving, slowly – too slowly, I realized. I turned, to look upwards, and saw something burning high above us: a pale light, wavering, like the moon on water. Three silver threads, cobweb-slayer, fell away upwards, towards the light.

Suddenly, something was moving silently away from us, upwards through the dark, following one of those threads: I couldn't focus on it, couldn't tell what shape it was; but I guessed it must be Alice. Then Clara, too, moved away. The two of them swam up, glowing shapes drifting into the light and the silence, and were gone. I was left alone; but not quite alone. Something was with me, something cold and strong. Something inhuman. I turned to face it.

There was nothing more. My eyes snapped open, my timesense unable to make any sense of what happened next. I searched through the next few hours, and then the next few days, but found nothing. Something tightened and twisted in my chest. It could only mean one thing. A couple of hours in the future, my time would run out. I would be dead; or I would no longer be myself.

Alice would get away, though, and so would Clara. It looked as if I would be able to keep the girl safe long enough to find Alice, and get her away. Nausea built up in my stomach as I thought about it. If I went down into the ley-net, I would never come up again. Only my body would remain in the Carrion Zone, strange dreams drifting through its brain, with no one there to see them. But Alice was lost in the net, and it was my fault. I owed it

to her to go in and find her, to guide her back to her body. And, I reminded myself, I would be as good as dead anyway, soon enough, when the mindseed sent out its first questing shoots.

"All right," I took a breath, and let it out. "Let's go in."

Clara said nothing for a moment, but looked at me, the ghost of a frown troubling her brow. "What did you see? Is it safe?"

"Yes. It's safe." I created a smile for her, and opened my hands in the air.

Clara took my hand, and led me down.

Everything was dark, and cold, and silent – like sinking into deep water, and at the same time like falling into a void. It felt as if I was fading from the world, leaving my body further and further behind. Of course, all that was happening was that Clara was transferring more of my consciousness into the arc. And, of course, there was no space here: it was only my mind re-interpreting the conceptual space that held us. But the illusion was absolute; we were two points of light, points of life, burning red in the depths of an ink-black ocean. The darkness seemed to swirl around us as we fell, still somehow connected to each other though we no longer had hands to hold: a pair of scarlet threads spiralling down into the dark.

Far below us, something moved, and the echoes of that movement filtered up to us as if through water, with a sound like distant laughter.

My body was lying in the house on Halfpenny Wynd, my eyes closed, as if I were asleep. Clara had given up the sofa to me – she was more used to surfacing, she said, so she could take one of the chairs. I didn't tell her that I had no expectations of coming back up. When we descended, the rain was still streaming down the windows, a soothing sound; as I lay back I could almost believe that the mnemonic Clara whispered was a lullaby, that we really were only sleeping, that everything we saw in the ley-net was a dream. I did my best to relax as Clara took my mind to pieces and moved it down, piece by piece, into the silence of the arc.

"Are you all right?" It was Clara's voice, though of course she had no mouth to speak with, down here.

I wondered how to reply, and decided to try speaking as I normally would. I had to fight off an irrational fear that if I did, I'd get a mouthful of darkness.

"I think so." My voice this time. "How are we able to communicate?"

"I've rewired you a bit. Your speech centres are tied to a transmission construct. It's quite safe."

Something was troubling me, but I hadn't been able to work out what it was. Now that the transfer was complete, and I was fully aware once more, it seemed suddenly obvious.

"How did we get into the net? Alice's house isn't anywhere near a node, or even near an arc. I would have sensed it if it was."

"We're not in the ley-net," Clara replied, and I could sense that she was distracted: while talking to me, she was busy doing something else. "This is a transient node. I created it to allow us access to the net without the Grey

Man sensing us."

"You created a node?" I felt a pulse of fear, remembering how Myerson had done the same thing.

"It's easy when you know how. You have to be able to sense at least two other nodes – three is better – in order to fix your transient one in position. Then you build it, like any other construct. But it won't exist unless I keep reinforcing it. When we've surfaced, I'll destroy it, and we'll be back in the centre of the blind spot. As far as the Grey Man is concerned, we'll have vanished without a trace. It's a trick we learned from the Dancers." She paused a moment. Then: "I'm creating the navigation constructs we need now. Then I'll open up an arc to the main body of the ley-net."

"And then?"

"Then we find Alice."

"You make it sound very easy."

"We can send out seeker drones. They'll find her for us. And they're fast."

"How fast?"

"We're not sure. Do you know Chang? Before they ruled the ley-net out of bounds, he was trying to measure whether information moves at the speed of light between the nodes, or whether it's instantaneous. He never completed his research."

"Because he couldn't go back into the net."

She was silent for a moment. "He never took much notice of the rules, or the committees. The Grey Man took him. His body's in a hospital in Australia."

As she spoke, something was taking shape in the emptiness before her: a glowing web, a cage of ghostly white threads. As the construct grew, the threads became brighter, and I thought I saw something moving, pulsing, at the heart of the tightly-woven lattice. A pair of tendrils snaked out, feeling their way through the dark, seemingly blind, but making unerringly for us, wrapping themselves around us, binding us together.

At once, I felt the darkness opening up before us, and the construct hauled us along the arc that Clara had made, and into the net. We seemed to be moving forward, but at the same time we were falling, sinking deeper, the lines to our bodies trailing behind us as we fell.

The silence was broken. The distant echoes I had heard at first were all about us now, above as well as below. Those above were weak, transient: some persisted for a time before vanishing altogether; others lasted only seconds, or what seemed to be seconds, before vanishing once more. With a shock I realized that these were people in the Carrion Zone, who could be sensed only when they came to the nodes; those that appeared and vanished were crossing over arcs.

But the space below us was worse, much worse: I could sense the depth of what lay below, as if it were a terrifying chasm; I could sense no end to that space. As we descended, I thought I could feel myself changing, as if layers of my mind were being stripped away, left behind; and I began to understand what Clara had meant by going deep. She and Alice had found the Dancers there, in the depths. I wondered what they had sacrificed in order to make contact.

Something was moving towards us, a bundle of light,

something like the construct that Clara had made to guide us, but faster and more compact. It was small, smaller than Clara or myself, and simpler in structure. For a while it hovered nearby, and I imagined that it was examining us, curious and thoughtful, almost as if it recognized us; then it sped away, down into the depths.

"What was that?"

"A drone, I think," Clara said, shortly. "Someone knows we're here. Or... No, it wasn't a drone. It was something similar, but it didn't feel like a construct. I think it was a Primitive. A kind of simple form of Dancer."

"Should we do something?" I stared at the space where the thing had been, wishing I had studied it more closely.

"There's nothing to be done. It wasn't intelligent. It was a common form, a primal form. We've known about them for years. The higher forms are different. You'll know if you meet one."

"So these creatures aren't anything special?"

"It's hard to know. Maybe they're automata, like the drones, and the other constructs. Whatever they are, they haven't yet evolved to a point where they're worth talking to. Don't worry. There's much more to see. We're coming to a node. All the life forms cluster there – the Primitives, the drones and constructs, sometimes the Dancers themselves, sometimes the Bodiless. It's like an oasis. Or a hot spring on the ocean floor."

As we travelled on through the arc, I came to understand what she meant. There was a great light ahead: the glow of many, many beings like us, and of many smaller things, Primitives and drones drifting through the dark; and as we grew closer I saw other things, too: constructs larger and more complex than Clara had made to guide us, and some static forms, glowing like the others but with no sign of movement, like the ghosts of corals. In the midst of all the activity, a great, translucent, luminous reef fell away from us, a ragged shape stretching down into the gloom until it was lost from sight. There were voices all around us, though I couldn't catch much of what was being said. Some of the voices were non-human: the cries of shoals of Primitives moving around the reef, the automatic, instinctive signals of the drones. I thought of Alice's dormant mind, reduced to sending out a pulse every 14 seconds. Then I crushed the thought to nothing.

The reef, I thought, must be composed of the remains of some species of Primitive, some analogue of coral that existed as pure information in the ley-net. This was the raw material from which the constructs were forged, dead strands and contours of data, waiting to be remade into something new.

"Here," Clara said, and at once she began to send out drones into the dark, tiny forms, sharp and fast, like arrowheads with long, twisting tails. Two swam out ahead of us, darting around the reef and vanishing into the distance. A third turned about, and sped back the way we had come. Each one was following an arc.

"And now?" I wondered, turning my attention back to Clara.

"We wait." I thought I caught an edge of laughter in her words. "It won't be long."

I wondered what a long wait meant, down here: whether

our bodies would be sleeping for hours, or whether we would wake a few seconds after sleeping. I let my mind wander, admiring the reef-life; and as I did so I caught the echo of a sound, a sound that seemed to come from within my mind. A sharp, cold, quiet sound: a metallic click, as of a lock sliding open.

"Did you hear that?"

"I didn't hear anything."

When I told her what I had heard, Clara was silent a long while. Then she said simply: "You hear strange things down here. No one knows all the effects of travelling in the net."

She seemed reluctant to say any more, so I left it at that; but for some reason that tiny sound had made me uneasy, and I was impatient for the waiting to be over.

Clara was right: the seeker drones were back within what seemed a few minutes. They hovered nearby, waiting for further instructions, their tails waving gently, as if swayed by some imperceptible current.

"They didn't find her," murmured Clara.

If I had been in my own body, I would have buried my head in my hands. "Why not? Where is she? Did they search the whole of the ley-net?"

"Of course," Clara replied, shortly. "They knew what to look for. They would have found Alice, if she was here."

"Which means?"

"One of two things. Either she managed to escape the Grey Man and find a way back into her body, or..."

"Or?" I demanded, though I could guess what she would say.

"Or she didn't. If she was caught, then she may have been changed, altered beyond recognition as the Grey Man twisted her mind. The drones might have found her, but passed her by."

"And what if she found her way to the Dancers?" I asked, seeing a shred of hope. "If they're protecting her, they might have camouflaged her somehow."

"Maybe," Clara didn't seem convinced. "Or maybe they would have guided her back to the Carrion Zone. I don't know."

The seeker drones were growing restless, twitching their tails. They turned away from us, their barbed heads moving this way and that as if trying to catch some elusive scent. Further away, I saw that the life upon the reef was also disturbed, the Primitives diving away to shelter where they could, the drones drifting closer to the body of the reef where they could hardly be seen. One long, thin, conical form, which I had assumed to be a single creature, broke into two, the better to hide. Even I could sense something, like the change in the air that tells you a storm is on the way.

Something was coming.

"The Dancers?" I asked.

Clara replied, softly: "The Bodiless."

I hadn't sensed them, hadn't seen them coming. Too late, I remembered how Myerson had been able to play with my timesense. I should never have relied on it; but I suppose it was too much a part of me for me to break the habit so easily. I thought of the vision I had before we entered the ley-net, the flashforward, and wondered how

much of it was true, and how much had been etched into my mind by the Grey Man.

Once again, I heard a sound, deep inside my mind: heavy footsteps on a wooden floor. Then the sound faded, and was gone. I wondered if it was an effect of the mindseed, disrupting my thoughts as it began to sprout. Whether it was or not, there was no time to think about it now.

"Get away," I told Clara. "Get back to the Carrion Zone. And don't stay in Alice's place. Get to a safe-house. Find Eric, if you can. He might be able to protect you."

"What about you?"

"I have to stay."

"But the Bodiless – they'll take you."

"They already have me. It's only a matter of time before I become one of them. Get away. Quickly, before they reach the node."

Clara said nothing, but the guide-construct disengaged its tendrils from me, and moved aside. Clara hesitated a moment, as if trying to think of something more to say. Then she was moving silently away from me, upwards through the dark, following a silver thread back to the transient node she had made, and back to the Carrion Zone.

For a moment, I was alone. Then something else was with me.

Something moved past me, following Clara upwards. I couldn't focus on it, couldn't tell what shape it was; in my vision, I had taken it for Alice. Now I knew it was not. It was one of the Bodiless, the humans who had forsaken their bodies to become creatures of the net. I wondered whether this one had a body still living, somewhere, on a life-support machine, and whether it remembered, or cared. The bodies lived for a while, sometimes for years, if they had the appropriate medical assistance. Then they died; but in the eyes of the Bodiless they were never anything more than carrion.

The two glowing forms, Clara and her pursuer, swam up into the silence. Clara's construct was dragging her behind it, making good speed, but the Bodiless creature was gaining on her. Then they were gone.

The reef seemed deserted: the Primitives had hidden themselves away. Only I was left, and something else, something cold and strong. Something inhuman, rising behind me from out of the depths. I turned to face the Grey Man, the oldest of the Bodiless, the least human of them, wishing I had eyes, so that I might close them.

Then the mindseed began to grow. Something slipped into my mind, like a sliver of ice, and everything faded to black.

Unbidden, my timesense showed me a glimpse of the years ahead: not a strong glimpse, as before, but terrible enough for all that. My body walked the earth, invulnerable but blinded, the eyes torn from its face. They were no longer needed. Through the net, I could sense where I was going; through the net, I could move my body like a distant puppet, doing my master's bidding.

I was one of many. Myerson was another; Alice was a third. There was the man I came to know as Chang, and others, dozens at first, then hundreds, then a host. My

father was one of us. I had always hoped, after his death, that he might have leapt into the net somehow, and survived; now we were together once more.

The safe-houses were destroyed, one by one: Athens first, the weakest; then Kirriemuir, Cape Town, Ho Chi Minh City, Dreiberg, Hammerfest... We left New Orleans until last, and we gathered the few survivors to us, one by one. Eric was one of us, by then. Clara was not; she had escaped us in Scotland, but by the time we reached New Orleans nothing could withstand us. She tried. She called on the Dancers, but could not make them understand. I found her. I plucked out her eyes.

Then came the expansion across the world. The nodes grew strong, and new ones were forged; wherever we walked between two nodes, an arc was etched in our footsteps.

The call of the nodes grew louder, so that ordinary people were drawn to them, a multitude of bodies converging, carrion ready for the feast. We tore them from their bodies, and dragged the remains of their minds into the net. There we created constructs like never before, built not of the dead husks of the Primitives, but of humanity; we took their minds apart, and made new creatures from the scraps.

It was a kind of paradise.

I opened my eyes, and realized, slowly, that I still had eyes to open.

I was lying on the sofa in Alice's house. Only moments had passed since Clara took me into the net. The rain was still falling, whispering on the stone, the sky still painted an angry colour by the stormclouds. I shivered, and clumsily manoeuvred myself into a sitting position.

I had no idea why I was there, apparently unharmed, no idea why the Grey Man should have released me. It made little sense. I felt no different. I didn't feel like one of his agents in the Carrion Zone. I felt like myself, though rather battered. The scratch on my hand was still there, wrapped in its bandage. My head was throbbing, but there was none of the loss of self that the mindseed should have brought. Not yet, anyway.

Remembering the flashforward, I shuddered, horrified at what I was to become. The worst of it was that I would have no remorse, no understanding that I had once been a human, like the carrion I sought; and as I had seen it, there was nothing I could do to prevent it. If that was the fate of the Bodiless, I wished my father had simply died, his mind vanishing along with his body.

Then I realized that Clara was gone.

Suddenly I understood the sounds I had heard, down in the net, the sounds that seemed to have come from inside my mind. The soft click of a lock sliding open, as Myerson entered the house. The sound of his boots on the wooden floor. Some part of me must have been aware, some pre-conscious process listening out for danger while I slept. It could do nothing to save Clara, though. All it could do was warn me, and I hadn't understood the warnings.

A sound reached me from the hallway outside. Of course: only moments had passed. Myerson was still here.

He opened the door, and stood there in the gloom of the

hallway, staring at me with his empty eyes. His hand gripped Clara's throat; she looked at me, her lips pressed tightly together, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Hello, Benjamin." Myerson's words were clumsy and slow, as if he had not spoken a single word in the three years since he had left his body.

I nodded, unable to speak, not knowing what to say if I did.

"I found you in Vienna," he continued, the words still stumbling from his bloodless lips. "I found you in England. I lost Alice, somehow, but I found you. I found you there, I found you here. I can find you again."

I nodded again, wondering why he would need to find me. With the mindseed in my head, I would be one of the Bodiless soon enough. There was something about his voice, something apart from his difficulty in forming words, something important that I couldn't quite place.

"I have your friend," Myerson said.

"Yes." I cleared my throat, trying to stay calm, trying to work out what to do. My timesense was no help. I could see nothing; and if I could, I wouldn't trust what I saw.

Myerson hesitated a moment. Then, with an effort, he said: "Why are you still human?"

I shook my head, slowly, not understanding the question, not wanting to anger him. He was a Shifter. He could take my body apart, piece by piece, with only a thought. Mine, or Clara's. He could unlock the bonds that held us together. I'd seen it happen, once. I didn't want to see it again, especially not from the inside.

"The mindseed," Myerson said, softly, almost plaintively, and at last I understood.

The seed should have sprouted by now. It should have sent shoots and tendrils through my mind, mapping every connection, then thrusting a root down into the ley-net to transfer my consciousness down. There, the Grey Man would have been waiting. But the seed had not grown. Somehow, something had killed it before it had a chance to bud. Something, or someone.

I rose to my feet, though I hadn't thought to move. My hand lifted from my side; my fingers opened in the air, like a flower. I took a step forward.

None of it was my doing. Something was controlling me, a Shifter, moving my limbs as if I were a marionette. Myerson, I thought at first – but no, from the look in his face he was as mystified as I was. Something about his expression was familiar: something I had seen a couple of days before, in the mirror at the railway station, while a thread of my blood spiralled down into the dark. Myerson was tired, strung out after too many days spent running, too many nights without rest. Too many days in fear. That was what I had heard in his voice: fear. Simply fear. I wondered what could have frightened him; but I already knew the answer. Myerson was frightened of me. He stared at me, trembling, and I recognized the look he wore, the look of the hunted, the look animals have when they know their time up, when they know the hounds have scented their blood. As I moved toward him he staggered back, letting Clara slip from his hands, his breath coming in harsh, trembling gasps.

My fingers closed, thumb and forefinger meeting in the

air. My wrist turned about, miming a key turning in a lock.

A strangled sound escaped Myerson's throat. His head lolled sideways, saliva drooling from his lips. Something was severing the nerves in his body, one by one. Something was unravelling the tendons, liquefying the muscles, unfastening the bones. He wavered, then fell to the floor as his vertebrae collapsed. He was a bag of skin, filled with pulpy flesh and disintegrating bones. Something raised his head – it was impossible for him to do it himself – and his empty eyes looked up at me from the floor. Something made his lips move. Something made him attempt a smile, drawing the lips back in a horrible grimace.

Only then did it stop his heart.

My hand fell back to my side as the Shifter released me, and I turned away, fell to my knees, and retched dryly over the bare floorboards. My stomach was empty.

It was a long time before I could banish that smile from my mind. Maybe it was a sign of forgiveness for what I had done to him. Maybe not. Either way, I was glad Clara hadn't seen it. I was glad she didn't know what had happened inside his body. The corpse gave no sign of the turmoil within: I could almost imagine that Myerson was sleeping.

We closed the door. It was a long time before either of us wanted to speak. Clara curled herself up on the sofa, staring at the sky, listening to the rain. I paced the room, trying to remember what had happened in the ley-net. The Grey Man had found me, I was sure.

The mindseed had started to grow. I hadn't imagined it.

My timesense had told me I would die in the net, but I was still alive.

I caught sight of my reflection in a mirror that stood in the corner, and shrugged. My reflection shrugged back.

Then it winked.

Or rather, I winked. The Shifter was back. It had snapped my eye shut for a second, sending me some kind of signal, a message I didn't know how to read. I kept my gaze on the mirror, and listened as my reflection began to speak.

"I'm not the person I was. I am something else, something new. Neither one thing nor another: a symbiosis. The Grey Man had me, and the mindseed had come to life. Once it sprouted, there was no way to reverse its effect. In the ley-net, it might have been possible; but the brain is a physical structure, and the mindseed was altering that structure."

Somewhere behind me, Clara shifted about. I knew she had turned to look at me. "Then why aren't you one of them, one of the Bodiless?"

"Because I made the same deal Alice made. The Dancers are curious about us, just as we're curious about them. They want to see the Carrion Zone through our eyes. One of them was riding Alice's mind. Another is riding mine. In exchange, it froze the mindseed, and re-routed the neural connections that had been corrupted or destroyed. It's watching now, out of my eyes. It senses everything an instant before I do."

It allowed me to remember, then. The Grey Man had risen from the depths, and the Dancer had risen behind

it. It was immense, and immensely complex – it must have seen me as little more than a glorified Primitive. It had three pulsing hearts, and its web of tendrils glowed brighter than my own form, brighter than the reef itself. And it moved: information coursing in its veins, it moved, swayed by tides of thought, dancing through the abyss.

It stopped the Grey Man with a touch.

Then it cast out a tendril and pulled me to it, inside it. It looked into my mind, and saw what I had seen: what my timesense had shown me.

"They don't have much concept of time," I said, not knowing what I was about to say until I had said it. "They didn't realize what the Grey Man had planned for us. They don't like to interfere; but this was a special case. An entire world, about which they knew almost nothing, and the Grey Man was about to destroy it. They couldn't allow that."

"What did they do?" Clara asked me softly.

"They've altered the structure of the ley-net. They herded the Grey Man, and his Bodiless servants, into one single node, in one small section of the net. Then they severed the arcs on each side. The Bodiless can still create new nodes and arcs; but they have to use the points of reference they have. You can only create a node if you can pinpoint its location in relation to the others. The Bodiless only have one node to play with. They can create more, but they'll remain inside that node. The only one left outside was Myerson – and he was chased back into his body." Which meant he was truly dead: I had killed him when I had destroyed his body.

"And the rest of us?" Clara asked me. "Can we use the net?"

"We're welcome, as guests," I told her. "But our hosts don't want to be disturbed. They'd rather watch from a distance – and, occasionally, from very close up. They need a mature human mind to ride: they didn't want to risk damaging yours. Even with mine, they have to restrict themselves to the Dancer equivalent of peering through a keyhole. Our perceptions are very strange to them, very limited. They're very interested in vision; they can't quite grasp it yet. They're having to reinterpret the visual signals in terms they can understand."

My reflection frowned; the watcher behind my eyes retreated a little. I took the opportunity to wonder aloud: "Why did my timesense show me nothing beyond the trip into the net? Why did I think I was going to die there?" I felt the watcher rise into my mind once more; and I watched, and understood, as my reflection answered: "The flashforward could only show me what would happen to Benjamin. Not to the person he would become."

I fell silent, then.

Out in the hallway, past Myerson's broken body, the telephone was ringing.

I suppose the Pfeiffer gates should have held me back; but then, they hadn't detected the mindseed when I had entered last. They didn't register the Dancer that lay coiled in my mind, its consciousness stretched over every node and arc of mine.

Alice was still there: Eric hadn't yet arranged for her

transfer to a hospital. She lay unmoving, her black hair tumbling over the pillow, and looked for all the world as if she were in the depths of sleep. The graze on her temple, where her head had collided with the edge of the railway sleeper, was healing nicely.

"There's no change," Eric said, and there was a weariness in his voice that I hadn't heard before. "I have to confess, I hoped the two of you would be able to find her. But there's no sign of activity there. Only the same signal pulse as before: a wave of neural activity, every 14 seconds, from the corpus callosum. It never varies."

I smiled. "You guessed we'd go down into the net."

"I knew your father," he said, lifting his shoulders. "He always said you were stubborn. And I knew Alice and Clara had been making unauthorized trips – I didn't approve, but I could hardly stop them. This isn't a dictatorship, after all. It's a safe-house." He sighed. "When the Pfeiffer gates registered another alteration in the structure of the net, I knew that something must have happened, and I called you at once. I didn't even imagine the Grey Man would be gone; I thought you must have woven Alice's way out of the net."

Clara said: "I couldn't find her. I don't know where she went. Maybe she became one of the Bodiless after all. Maybe she's trapped in that node, with the rest of them."

I leaned forward, and touched Alice gently on the cheek.

"No. She'll be back. She's there, in the ley-net."

Clara stared at me. "But the seeker drones missed her."

"And so did the Bodiless. They all made the mistake of looking for a human mind."

Eric narrowed his eyes, peering into mine, as if trying to see the Dancer that watched from inside. "What should they have been looking for?"

"Something smaller. More precisely, a few dozen drone-like creatures, each one an element of Alice's consciousness. They're wandering the ley-net now, from node to node, waiting to hear the signal from Alice's body. Sooner or later, one of them will pass Kirriemuir, and then it will be drawn out of the net, and back into Alice's head. She won't wake up, not until the last drone is back in place; but you should begin to see some neural activity some time soon."

I left, then. I didn't want to stay.

There was so much more to see.

I crossed the marble hall and found a washroom, to change the dressing on my hand. Standing over the sink, watching the tainted water swirl around, and around, and away, I happened to glance up, into the mirror. As I covered the wound with a fresh, white bandage, my reflection caught my eye, and created a knowing smile.

He nodded to me, then quickly turned away.

Alexander Glass, an Interzone discovery, wrote "Forgotten Tongues" (IZ 144) and its sequel "The Language of the Dead" (IZ 161) as well as a number of earlier stories. The above new story is his longest for us to date. Still in his 20s, he lives in London.

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The antique propeller-driven aeroplane soared through the skies over England, heading for the country's most important heritage site. We were due to touch down at Blackpool Airport in less than half an hour.

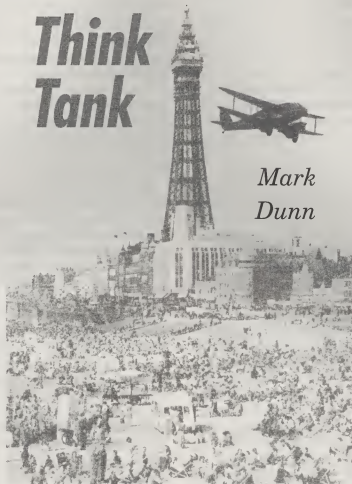
I was the only human on board. The other passengers were all colonials on their grand tour of the preserved human heritage sites. It had taken months of saving just to be able to join them for the Hamburg-Blackpool leg. The tourists were in human guise, as they always were when out of their hives, but instantly recognizable by the buzzes, clicks and crunches of their language. Not to mention the uniformly fashionable height, skin colour and hairstyles they'd adopted for this trip. They were busy comparing their travels, in a manner that struck me as somehow competitive: "So you've done Swindon, but did you get time to see the car factory? *Such* an inefficient mode of transport!"

These were our rulers, our employers, and our bankers. During the colonization, the billions-strong ocean of humanity was reduced to a more "manageable" sea of a hundred million or so, which gradually dried and dwindled into a few isolated puddles, each under a watchful colonial administration. Now, over 800 years later, we were utterly subjugated. The colonials had saved us from annihilating ourselves and our planet, or so we were taught, and most of us were too ignorant to argue. Yet the rumours said that there was not only a resistance movement, but that it had developed some sort of weapon. This was what I was coming to find. It made sense that it would be in Blackpool: the humans living in the heritage sites had greater access to higher technology than the rest of us. But what sort of weapon was it?

As the plane touched down at Blackpool Airport I felt my muscles relax, and it suddenly occurred to me that I was terrified of flying and had been rigid for the duration of the flight. Probably better to realize this after the flight than before, I thought. I peeled my hands from the armrests, leaving behind a pair of sweaty indentations.

When the hatch opened, the first thing I noticed was the blistering heat of Blackpool's artificially maintained microclimate (we had been invaded when global warming had reached its peak, and the heritage sites came complete with period weather). The second thing, as I

Think Tank



Mark
Dunn

stepped out of the plane, was the unpleasant sensation of all the pores in my skin opening at once. The third was the rank of gates standing between me and the town. In the scratchy colonial glyphs, signs above the gates indicated which type of passenger was to pass through. They were categorized according to stage in life cycle, social caste, and weight of luggage. The tourists herded towards the gates. To the right of the 20-odd gates was a small, low building. A sign beside its door, just legible in the heat haze, read "Humans." I trudged across the sweltering tarmac towards the hut, the sole representative of my class.

Inside the hut was a tiny office dominated by a large desk almost completely covered by a neatly tessellated array of papers – immigration forms. Behind the desk sat a man, or rather, a disguised colonial, and behind him, in the corner, was a small stool on which stood an electric kettle. I could see no cups, and the colonial didn't offer me a drink. He gestured me towards the chair on the opposite side of the desk.

I sat down, and could now read the headings on the documents that would map out my life for the duration of my stay: application for temporary residence, declaration of belongings, registration with an employment agency, prescription for eyeshades and skin barrier, and a dozen more in the same vein.

A crackling sound issued from the immigration officer's mouth: "Name, please."

"Eric Reiner," I replied in English. That was foolish.

"Your colonial name! I do have to write it down, you know."

Like most humans, I spoke their language, but, since the colonials' natural way of speaking involved gargling with fine gravel, I had something of a speech impediment. I crunched and coughed through my "official" name and ID number. The officer slowly began to transcribe the information on to each of the forms.

"Purpose of visit?"

To join the rebellion. "To get seasonal work before starting college."

"Why have you not booked a return flight?"

I wasn't planning on leaving. "I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to get employment for."

"You will have employment for the duration of your

stay. College terms begin on the first of October, so I will book a flight back to Hamburg on the 23rd of September."

"That sounds all right."

The officer paused in order to frown at me. My approval of these arrangements was clearly not required. He began writing again.

"You will receive confirmation at your hostel in due course, and the cost will be debited to your bank account. There will be a small administration fee." He looked up again briefly, to make sure I didn't offer my approval again. "Transport from Hamburg to your reservation is beyond my jurisdiction. You will have to arrange that yourself."

"I understand," I said, as neutrally as I could.

The officer continued his calligraphy. "Blackpool is a controlled ecosystem which can only sustain a human population of around 10,000, so we have to keep track of your numbers. Make sure what comes in, goes out again."

I may have been a little optimistic in hoping to stay here. Perhaps I could pretend I had family ties to the town and claim permanent residence that way. I'd worry about it later.

Slowly, methodically, the forms were completed. A couple of devices were produced from a desk drawer and applied to various parts of my body, in order to measure the sensitivity of my skin and retina. Another drawer supplied a syringe for a blood test. I have to assume the officer was qualified to perform these medical tests, even though the process of sterilizing the syringe consisted of boiling the kettle and holding the needle over the rising steam. Heritage medicine for a heritage site.

Eventually the bureaucrat pronounced himself satisfied, gave me copies of a couple of the medical certificates, and waved me through to the next room. There, a colonial "woman" told me to strip. While I did so, she read my prescriptions and selected a pair of tinted contact lenses from a cabinet. She carefully balanced one on each thumb, and in a single lightning-swift movement planted them firmly on my eyeballs. I howled with pain. While I was preoccupied with trying to disinter my eyes from my frontal lobe, I was sprayed with skin barrier. I dressed and blindly groped my way out of the airport.

By the time I reached the hostel, my eyeballs had emerged from the back of my skull and were well on the way to becoming spherical again. I also felt noticeably cooler, thanks to the skin barrier. Mrs Tattersall, the landlady, showed me to my room, briskly demonstrated the facilities, and explained the rules.

"Breakfast is at seven, evening meal at six-thirty, lights out at eleven. Except for tomorrow night, of course." She winked.

"What's happening tomorrow night?"

"That's when we use our tank. You must join us. Now, I'll leave you to settle in. I've got to help my husband with the tea."

A tank! Was this the weapon I'd heard about? And they were planning to use it tomorrow! It looked like I'd hit the jackpot. My nebulous dreams of a revolution had crystallized into hard reality. But this was a reality perpendicular to what I had imagined. The rebels were

what? A group of middle-aged women, about to unleash a tank on an unsuspecting bunch of tourists?

My wild thoughts gradually subsided, and I began to look round the room. It was simply furnished: bed, wardrobe, chest of drawers, mirror. There was also a fish-tank, clogged with overgrown vegetation. A few tiny fish darted around inside. On the bed was an envelope addressed to me. The letter inside said: "We are pleased to offer you the position of sales assistant at Flat Jack's Fish Bar for the period 15th July to 22nd September. Please arrive at 8.30am on your first day, for training. Uniform will be provided. Yours faithfully, - (General Manager, North Pier)."

My immigration forms must have been processed incredibly quickly: it was barely an hour since I'd left the airport. And the 15th of July was tomorrow! They obviously didn't want me to be idle during my stay. The terms of employment included with the letter contained a complex algorithm for calculating the shifts I would be working. Half an hour later, I was relieved to find that I would be available for the event tomorrow night. I made a note to ask Mrs Tattersall where it was taking place. Did they really have a tank? I thought, as I watched the fish flicking in and out of the thick weed. Something seemed wrong. I felt as though I was missing something obvious. My excitement at finding the resistance was clouding my vision.

I left for work early so that I could walk part of the way and see a little of the town. It was going to be another hot day. The rest of the world had long since cooled down, once colonization had brought an end to the old fuel-burning industries, but here the old climate had been preserved. I wondered how far the colonials had gone in preserving the town. I noticed cracked paving slabs, broken glass in tram shelters, faded paintwork on buildings. There was a painter's scaffold half way up the ancient metal tower. Were they painting it, or had the scaffold been left there for the past 800 years?

Flat Jack's Fish Bar was at the entrance to the North Pier. The pier's manager was waiting for me. He seemed to be having problems with his human disguise. He had a wall eye, a hunch, and walked in a manner that a real human would have found painful to imitate.

"Price list on the wall," he buzzed. "Food kept warm on these shelves. The boy cooks it." The manager aimed a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of a pale boy of around 14, who was occupied trying to ignite the fryer. "Enter the total amount in the register and press 'sale.' There is change in the drawer. Any shortfall in the takings will be taken out of your pay. One last thing: don't talk to the customers in their language; it is painful to listen to. Use your own language. We don't understand it, but it sounds authentic. OK, we open at nine."

So much for training. The manager limped off to check on the rest of his concessions on the pier. The cook must have been following the direction of my gaze. "One of his knee joints is higher than the other. That's why he walks like that. I'm Charlie, by the way."

"Eric," I replied. "Did he mean it about the cash?"

"Of course. That's how the vacancy arose. Your pre-

decessor got a couple of decimal places wrong and ended up bankrupt."

The first tourists, a 'man' and 'woman,' entered almost as soon as we opened. They were nattering about some local scandal back home, but broke off when they reached the counter. The woman's speech then became much slower as she addressed me. She carefully enunciated her order. "Two... portions... of cod."

"Certainly, madam," I said, remembering to use English.

The woman turned back to her partner as I took the fish from the shelves. "And now we've got to fiddle with this silly money," she complained. "I wish they'd let us use our cards here. There's such a thing as too much native culture."

I placed her food on the counter. "That'll be two pounds eighty please."

"I believe... we owe you... two... pounds... eighty." The woman placed the correct change on the counter.

"Thank you. Enjoy your meal."

The colonials sat down at a table. "Isn't it peculiar how they have to prepare their food?" the man commented. "I wonder what difference it makes." They opened their mouths wide, stuffed the whole portions inside at once, swallowed, then got up and left. I guess they enjoyed it. They didn't complain, at least.

I turned round to see Charlie staring incredulously at me. "You don't have to be polite to them, for Christ's sake! They can't understand a word you're saying."

I felt my cheeks redden. "Sorry," I began. But Charlie had gone back to rolling bits of dead fish in batter.

As the day grew hotter and the temperature in the café became uncomfortable (despite the skin barrier), my manners worsened slightly, helped along by the patronizing attitudes and revolting eating habits of the customers. I wasn't able to be downright rude, much to Charlie's derision, since they could read human body language, even if they couldn't understand the words.

The strangest thing about the colonial customers was not their ability to swallow an entire meal at once, but the badges some of them wore, bearing odd messages written in English: "Call me Asshole," "Dirt Chewer," "Warts R Us," and others. I couldn't begin to imagine what they signified.

In my lunch break I went outside to investigate. Black-pool looked busy. Hundreds of human forms were walking on the promenade. But eerily, there was no corresponding sound of human voices. Instead there was a background hiss and buzz of the colonial language. I walked down the pier. Below me, on the beach, was a vast array of deckchairs stretching hundreds of feet to the next pier, each equipped with a tourist staring out to sea. The rows of chairs didn't just stop at the water's edge; they went right into the sea, their occupants oblivious to the rising tide. There were probably more deckchairs down there that were totally submerged. To the colonials, water and air were just two fluids.

A movement on the beach attracted my attention. One of the sunbathers closest to me was leaning over the side of her deckchair, scrabbling in the sand. She scooped some up and weighed it in her hand, letting grains slip

through her fingers until she was satisfied. Then, suddenly, her chest bucked and she coughed out a mouthful of gravel. When her throat was clear, she extended her lower jaw like the drawer of my cash register, and poured into it the fresh sand. Her jaw snapped shut. It was sickeningly audible, even from up here. Was this why they came? To refresh their voices?

Further down the pier I found the source of the badges. A banner above a stall read "Buttons for Cretins." Beneath, in colonial scrawl, was "I write your name in human script, only £1.20." The girl behind the counter waved me over.

"Is this where I come to be called an asshole?" I asked.

"Not unless you're a colonial," she replied. "Or an asshole, of course." We introduced ourselves. Her name was Gail. "You're new round here."

"Just arrived yesterday. It's a very strange place. I can't fathom out what it means to them."

"Well, for one thing, they flaunt it as an amazing technical achievement. It hasn't just been preserved, it's practically been placed in stasis. Erosion has been abolished. The rust on these railings is the same rust that was here 800 years ago. The salt smell in the air is artificial. The rumble of the trams is produced by speakers."

"But why go to all this trouble? What's in it for them?"

"I'm not sure, but I think they like to have a record of the civilizations they've destroyed – oops, sorry, *saved*." Gail hadn't fallen for the official line, either. "One thing's for certain," she continued, "all this makes for a very expensive holiday they can brag about back home."

"And the sand seems to go down well," I said.

A tourist couple approached the stall. I was about to apologize and leave but Gail said, "Don't go. They won't mind us talking. Bit of local colour, you know." She turned to the couple and smiled. "So, you must be cretins, then?"

The "man" nodded and pointed at the banner. "My... name... is –" he said, slowly and clearly, "and her... name... is –"

Gail nodded and kept smiling. "Well, now. In English, you, sir, would be known as Gerbil's Armpits. And you, madam, would be no less than Cheese-for-brains. How does that sound?"

The tourists nodded dumbly at Gail, and at each other. The man excavated some change from his pockets while Gail took a couple of blank badges from a tub and began to write on them. Cheese-for-brains and Gerbil's Armpits proudly pinned their new identities to their shirts and wandered happily back up the pier. "Heaven help me if they ever learn English," sighed Gail. She grinned at me.

"Do you really make a living from insulting our rulers?" I said.

"It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it. Do you disapprove?"

"I don't know. I just think we should be taking real action against them. Are you going to this meeting tonight?"

"What meeting?"

"The one with the tank."

"The what? Oh, *tank*... You don't know what tank is, do you?"

"Well, I assumed it was –" I began, then thought better of it. I wasn't going to impress Gail by bullshitting.

"Er, no, not really."

"You're staying at a hostel, right? Then you must have seen a fishtank around the place."

"There's one in my room, but it's full of weeds."

"That's tank. The weed. Or rather, the drug you get by pressing it."

"A drug?" Not a weapon, then. What an idiot I was! It should have been obvious when Mrs Tattersall first mentioned the name. "And it's called tank because it grows—"

"In a tank. Exactly!"

"Do you take it?"

"Only once. But the downer nearly killed me. Tank gives you a feeling of immense power. You take it with a group of people. The larger the group, the more potent it is. When it wears off, you feel utterly helpless and trapped. Suicidal, in my case. It's a feeling I don't care to experience again."

"Don't you think we are trapped and helpless?"

"That depends. If you mean trapped and helpless as in under the thumb of an invincible alien occupier, then yes, you're right. But if you mean trapped and helpless as in totally alone and isolated from the rest of human society, unable to enjoy life, then definitely not."

"The first of those, I think."

"And what were you planning to do about it?"

"Oh, you know, rise up, take over, chuck the colonials off the planet, that sort of thing." I could feel her becoming more scornful as I said it.

"Stop dreaming! How are we supposed to do that? We haven't the technology to make anything more deadly than a sharp stick. Then there's the small matter of being outnumbered by millions to one." Her tone softened as she saw my face fall. "Make the most of what you've got, Eric. We still have the little things that make life worth living."

"Like writing insults on badges?"

"Like meeting new people." Her smile disarmed me. "And don't knock writing childish insults. It's good for the ego."

I decided to go to the tankaholics' meeting. If nothing else, I might meet someone from the rebellion, although I was beginning to doubt its existence. That night, I took a frond of the weed from my fishtank to the Marton Social Club, and joined the queue for the pressing apparatus. My frond produced a few drops of tank, which were collected in a small plastic cup. I was directed into the main hall, where a couple of hundred people sat silently in rows of chairs. The last person to enter the hall closed the doors behind her and stood in front of the rows of chairs. She drained her cup, and the rest of the hall followed suit. I did likewise, licking the inside of my cup.

I was in an aeroplane. In the cockpit. Flying it. The other people from the hall were there with me. Inside me. Or I was inside them. We raised our arm and pointed. A collective decision. The aeroplane obeyed our direction, banking and turning. It was simple. We spent a while just flying, looking down at the earth below us. Eventually we pointed downward and landed in a desert. Leaving the plane, we raised an arm to shield our eyes

from the sun's glare. With our other arms we dug into the sand, deep, until water trickled up. We took off again. Below us we could see a village growing around the well we had dug. Fields were being planted around the village. People were waving up at us gratefully.

We flew around for some time, digging, building, farming. After a couple of hours (minutes? days? — I'd lost all sense of time) I could feel the others slipping away from me, until I was the only one left in the plane. Now I had total control of the plane, and it moved to my command alone. But with total power came total responsibility. I could not land the plane, for fear of causing some harm on the ground. I could not even move the plane, in case I did something wrong and crashed it. I left the cockpit, went to the hatch, and opened it. I parachuted out of the plane, and slowly drifted down to the ocean.

The next morning, I stared at my breakfast, incapable of making the effort to eat it. What difference would it make? The kaleidoscope of possible futures I had imagined had now collapsed into a single deterministic track. My fate would be whatever the colonial administration decided. My abilities, such as they were, would be noted down on a form, which would be processed to determine what position I should take. Suppose there was a mistake? I could end up cleaning toilets for a living, or mixing concrete to make kitchen hives.

Mrs Tattersall noticed my listlessness. "Are you all right, dear?"

"My future is going to be decided by a clerical error. I feel trapped and helpless."

"Tank can have that effect, especially the first time. The cure is to take it again."

But I didn't want to. Not because I couldn't deal with the downer, but because my reaction to the drug was so ambivalent. The high was also a low: I felt the power, but was too frightened to use it. The drug had, however, given me some perspective. I could now see that my dreams were just dreams, and nothing more. I needed to get a life. It wouldn't be the sort of life I had imagined, and I didn't like that, but at least it would be real. There was no resistance movement, that much was clear, and the rumours that had brought me to Blackpool were false, but that did not stop me believing that the human race should be free. Perhaps the colonials had saved us from ourselves, but they had also enslaved us. I could do nothing about that, but I could make the most of what little freedom I had. My job was hot and tedious, but there was pleasant company just down the pier.

I was trapped and helpless.

But I was not alone.

Mark Dunn is the winner of the first James White Award for short science fiction by a new author (see www.jameswhiteaward.com). The award, which was given for the above story, was presented on 22nd October 2000, at the Irish Writers' Centre, Dublin. Mark lives in Oxford and works for Oxford University Press, as an editor on their English dictionary's website. He tells us that this is his first published story: "unless you count a story in a small-circulation *Star Trek* fanzine produced by a friend who was desperate for copy"

Daemons in the Head

Since 1981 Walter Jon Williams has published 19 novels and a pair of collections, running the gamut from cyberpunk and hard science fiction to fantasy and historical adventure. His short fiction is in high demand, with his 1996 Martian-invasion piece, "Foreign Devils," winning the Sidewise Award for best alternate-history story. His most recent works are the epic disaster novel *The Rift* and the collection *Frankensteins and Foreign Devils*. A black belt in the martial-art discipline of *kenpo*, Williams makes his home in New Mexico.

Walter Jon Williams

interviewed by

Jayne Lynn

Blaschke

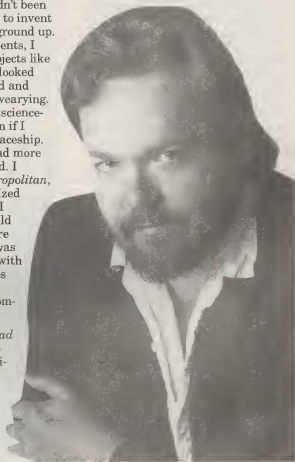
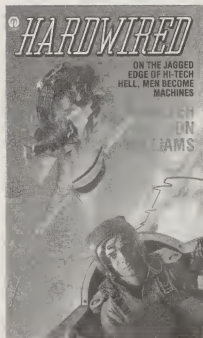
Metropolitan and *City on Fire* generated a lot of popular and critical acclaim for you. Those books were very labour-intensive and time-consuming to write, *City on Fire* in particular. Why were they so involved for you?

Because the books feature a type of fantasy world that really hadn't been done before, I was compelled to invent almost everything from the ground up. As well as the fantastic elements, I had to decide what simple objects like telephones and automobiles looked like, and how they functioned and what powered them. That's wearying. I couldn't rely on 75 years of science-fiction tradition the way I can if I design a space colony or a spaceship.

Plus, the project simply had more words in it than I anticipated. I started with one book – *Metropolitan*, and when I finished it I realized there was much more story. I hoped that *City On Fire* would tell that story, but many more stories kept appearing as I was writing, and I found myself with a thousand manuscript pages and – once again – a story I hadn't finished. It's a very complex story.

Were there any pitfalls you had to avoid when you decided to revisit the world of *Metropolitan* for *City on Fire*?

City on Fire isn't really a sequel – it's a continuing story in another volume, and there will be a third volume in this series that will complete the story. So



the difficulty was not so much in containing the world as to find a self-contained story to tell in each volume, out of the many stories that are actually going on.

You consider these books fantasy, but there's some debate among readers. Many people view them as science fiction.

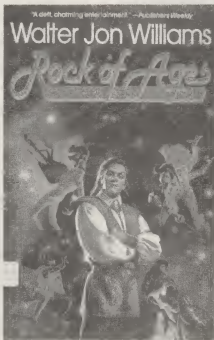
At first I didn't understand this, but George R. R. Martin explained to me that it was purely a matter of what he calls the furniture. Furniture, in George's perception, trumps category. If a book has dragons in it, then it's fantasy, even if these are Anne McCaffrey's dragons who are supposed to be carefully-worked-out sf constructs. If a book has flying cars and computers in it, then it's sf, and it doesn't matter that it's *City on Fire*, where something called "magic" is going on, performed by people who call themselves "mages" – people will just ignore all that and read it as sf.

None of this occurred to me when I set about writing what I thought was going to be a high-fantasy novel about an apprentice magician and her master. Because I thought that the classic high fantasy background was getting a little stale, at least to me – other people might have something new and exciting to say about ogres and castles, but I certainly don't – I thought I'd set it against a different sort of world.

So my idea was to think really hard about what magic was, and what it would mean, and then build the world from that point. And what I decided magic was, was the overthrow of the laws of nature by an act of human will. That definition stripped it to its essence. So that's how plasm works in the books – it's sort of concentrated, malleable chaos, capable of redefining nature when controlled by a human being.

The other element that entered into my calculations was the sub-genre called "urban fantasy" – which I realized wasn't particularly urban. All the fantastic elements in urban fantasy are the traditional fantasy elements of northern Europe – elves and whatnot – displaced to a modern setting. So I wondered what would happen if the fantastic elements were entirely derived from the urban setting, if their proper environment wasn't dark forests and tall mountains, but skyscrapers, power conduits, sewer lines, elevators, and subways.

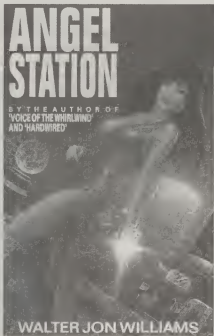
These were the two lines of thought that produced the *Metropolitan* series. But since I also included sf tropes like flying cars and computers, most readers seem to have approached the books with sf reading protocols, and were (perhaps) faintly disappointed. The action doesn't resolve as it would



in an sf story. But if you ignore the sf furniture and read the books with fantasy reading protocols, I think you'll find that they work.

Even though they are closely related, the blending of science fiction and fantasy hasn't been done successfully very often. What does it take to pull that off?

I think you just have to think harder about it. Among the examples I considered was the entire body of the works of Gene Wolfe. All his works are very rigorously thought out, but none of the architecture is visible on the surface, and what you see are seemingly disparate science-fiction and fantasy elements lurking in the background. They seem disparate, but they're not – you have to look closely at it to realize that.



The general setting of these books is a 1920s-30s technological world with magic. That's an uncommon era for either sf or fantasy – what drew you to that?

The books were about magic, so I didn't want the technology to dominate, and I restricted the tech to what you might find in a somewhat more scientific 1945 – 1945 with a few advances, like the flying cars. Plus, '40s tech – all the iron and rivets and bakelite – is so much more visual than the more efficient, less intrusive technology we have now, and was able to lend itself to some very nice descriptions.

So this isn't something that would've translated very well if you'd put it in, like say, the 1970s?

Well, nobody wants to remember the '70s! I mean, if I had to put bell-bottoms and Afros on those characters as well as loading them down with everything else, it would've been pretty dreadful.

You say you've got the third book in the works...

It's not in the works yet. My editor was fired and his whole line cancelled, so that will occasion some delay.

So have you given any thought to the fact that this would give you a fantasy trilogy?

Yes, that's a cause of despair. Endless despair, not to mention anguish and angst. But I've always thought that the best trilogies are the involuntary ones. Tolkien did not set out to write three books, it was just an accident of wartime paper shortages that they were published that way. E. R. Eddison ended writing a trilogy because he died during the third book and couldn't write a fourth. Not that this would stop him now, of course – E. R. Eddison™ would just carry on in his place.

You've been closely associated with cyberpunk. So now that the sub-genre has been declared dead many times over, what's your perception of cyberpunk's future?

I think cyberpunk has reinvented itself for the 21st century, and has found new ruling metaphors and techniques that will carry it forward. Part of the problem with the original perception of cyberpunk was that William Gibson's *Neuromancer* was such a critical, commercial and artistic success that all other writers were viewed in light of that one work. So cyberpunk was thought to be exclusively about dystopian futures involving the underclass and technology, where I thought it was just thinking a lot harder about the future and emerging technologies and what they all mean. Books like Bruce Sterling's *Holy Fire* and Neal Stephen-

son's *Diamond Age* and (all modesty aside) my own *Aristoi*, I think demonstrate new ways of combining newly-emerging technologies in interesting and plausible futures, though all of them demonstrate what I like to think of as cyberpunk thought, none of them are in any way stereotypical cyberpunk.

You study martial arts quite seriously.

I have a fourth-degree black belt in Kenpo, which is a Chinese martial art that came to the States via Okinawa and Hawaii, giving it an interesting mixture of Chinese and Japanese elements. It was one of the first – possibly the first – karate styles to be taught in the United States. And as a consequence, has evolved considerably since its arrival.

What drew you to this particular form?

I had a friend who was doing it, and who got me involved. It turned out to be quite an intellectually satisfying art. There's quite a bit in it more than kicking and punching. And it's been influential in a lot of my work – *Aristoi* in particular.

How's that?

One of the things that a movement art will do for you is make you more aware of the interface between your mind and your body, and how that works, and how the one can programme the other. And I realized that through doing Kenpo, my mind was being reprogrammed through my body. The people who devised this art were very intelligent people who had very particular points of view, which they reflected in their movements. By doing these movements, you can absorb the thoughts and attitudes of generations of martial artists.

I thought that expanding this idea into a kind of universal kinesic technology for *Aristoi* would be valuable, a way of creating a body language more universal than spoken language.

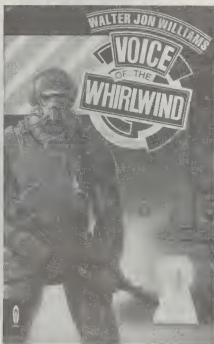
A purely "physical" racial memory?

A physical means of communication with deep psychological effect.

There seems to be a disproportionate number of fantasy and science-fiction writers who are practitioners of martial arts.

Possibly it's because writing science fiction is very sedentary and we all need an exercise form. And because so many of us are intellectual, we need an exercise form that isn't boring. Martial arts aren't dull – you're trying to keep someone from knocking your head off!

But I've noticed that some particular martial arts tend to attract writers. Aikido is one. Off the top of my head I can name about half a dozen



Aikido black belts in science fiction, some of whom I've worked with. Whereas Pat Murphy, Richard Kadrey, and I are the Kenpo cadre.

Before you were associated with cyberpunk or even science fiction, you wrote historical novels. How did you get from historical novels to what you're doing now?

When I was trying to break in, I shipped proposals off in practically any area of fiction I enjoyed reading. I wrote mystery proposals, I wrote science-fiction proposals, I wrote proposals for literary fiction. And for historical fiction, and as it happened, the historical fic-

tion was the first that sold.

I subsequently wrote five books in a series under the rather transparent pseudonym "Jon Williams," a name chosen for me by my publisher. But the market for historical fiction utterly collapsed. I can almost date it to July 1983, when suddenly I was without an occupation or an income.

At that time, a science-fiction proposal that had been around for years sold. Fortunately, it was the right coincidence at the right time, as I think I ended up in the right place.

So did you enjoy writing historical adventures?

I enjoyed them, certainly. There's a certain amount of overlap between the skills necessary to write sf and historical fiction, which is the ability to convey a world that is not the world of the present. As I was also writing adventure novels that took place on ships, I was also able to hone the ability to convey the intricacies of an alien technology – in this case, square-rigged sailing ships of war – to the reader without overly burdening them with exposition.

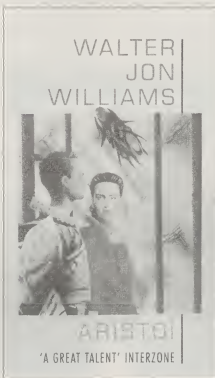
Now that you've established your career in sf, is there any temptation to go back and try historicals again?

Yes, there are some historical books I'd like to write. But unfortunately... Let me put it this way. One of the blessings and curses of my career is that I've always had to make a living at it. I've never had a day job, I've never taught, and until very recently I didn't have a spouse to support my artistic pretensions.

The necessity of making a living constrains some of my choices. So I have to consider whether I can sell something before I write it, and also the price for which I can sell it. The good part about having to deal with these considerations is that I am always constrained to write something that someone will want to read. So if I were to write historical fiction again – or anything outside of the science fiction/fantasy genre – I would have to find some way to get paid for it approximately as much as I'd get for writing a science-fiction novel, and preferably more, because I'd have to be compensated for the fact that I'd be leaving my regular career for a year or more while I wrote something else.

I've decided the only way to overcome this is to become a world-renowned best-selling author, in which case I can write any damn thing I want and they'll have to print it. Bestsellers are their own genre, and they write their own rules.

Speaking of which, your latest novel, The Rift, has become your most successful novel to date. In a nutshell, you split the U.S. right down the middle with a



Daemones in the Head

huge earthquake. I'm sure most British readers are unaware of the fact that there's a major system of faults that run, essentially, from New York to Texas.

Well, most Americans are unaware of this too, which is why I thought it would make an interesting story. The New Madrid fault is the most dangerous active fault in the entire world – the last series of quakes there, in 1811, started out with Richter 8.7 and then just kept going. The very thought that America can have an earthquake that isn't in California, let alone a huge earthquake, would come as a surprise to most people in this country.

What did you set out to accomplish with The Rift – apart from laying waste to North America?

Some of my motives were purely selfish. I wanted to write a book that would be relatively simple, having just finished *Metropolitan* and *City on Fire*, which were very complex books. And so I thought I would write a book set in the contemporary U.S. where mostly what I had to do was knock stuff down.

Both literally and metaphorically.

Yeah. I intended that it would be jolly good fun. The rewards of creation are oftentimes delayed, but the rewards of destruction are immediate.

The Rift is by Walter J. Williams, where previously we've had books by Walter Jon Williams and Jon Williams. You've quite a little cottage industry going here.

It's never me that decides this, I should point out. It's always the editors who decide they want one name or another.

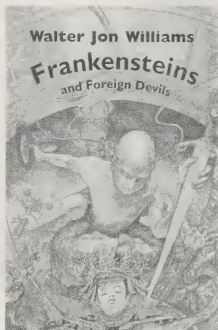
So what's next in the various Williams' pipelines?

I'm sort of between projects right now. I'm waiting for responses from publishers on the next literary endeavour, and in the meantime I've written a movie for the Chinese director Tsui Hark. It's the world's only all-singing, all-dancing, Chinese Marxist Broadway musical. It's called "Broadway Johnny" and it's based on my story of the same name.

How did adapting "Broadway Johnny" for the screen compare to originally writing it?

Screenplays are so different from fiction that it was essentially a whole secondary creation all over again. I had to discover the bits in my own work that were cinematic and make the most of them.

Plus, characters on screen can never have internal lives – all that they are has to be visible on screen. My fictional characters tend to have very strong internal lives, so this was a less-

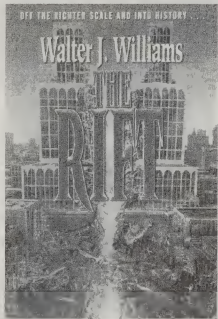


son very difficult for me to learn.

You're well known for your short stories. What draws you to the form?

Well, some ideas are short stories when you get them, so that's how they turn out. I enjoy writing short stories. It's a very interesting challenge to try and present something in a compact way. I'm not always successful at it. I tend to write very long short fiction.

I also realize there is no way I will ever make a living writing short stories, so in essence I have to write shorts in my spare time, as kind of a hobby. Therefore it has to be a very strong idea to get me to do all this extra work. That is why I think my best work is probably in the short form, simply because I'm responding to the strength of the idea, or to the emotional content of the idea, and that's



what's most likely to get me off my couch and writing in the first place.

Now that you've been at this for a while, do you find your limitations falling away as a writer?

I think my abilities are growing. I try to keep honing my axe and keep doing new things, but that's becoming more and more difficult to do, simply because publishing itself is in such disarray. Publishing has reinvented itself several times since I started, and rarely for the better. There's a lot of narrowcasting going on. If I write one successful book, the tendency is to insist that I write more books along that idea and that theme. So far I've pretty much resisted this. I have been able to develop a readership that sort of expects the next book to be a little bit different – if not a lot different. If I were beginning over again, I'm not sure that would be at all possible.

So what do your abilities allow you to do now that you couldn't do earlier in your career?

Something like *City on Fire*, quite frankly. Plus there are several books I've written that are "Everything Walter Has Learned in Life Up to This Point." The first of these was *Hard-wired*. And others were *Days of Atonement* and *Aristoi*. The *Metropolitan* sequence, perhaps in a somewhat narrower way, reflects a lot of my thought in political and philosophical spheres.

Who impresses you?

People impress me who have moral qualities that I do not possess. Nelson Mandela for one. I know that if I were Nelson Mandela, I would've punched some white guy in the nose years ago and blown the whole future of South Africa!

Crazed individuals who run true to a totally irrational vision also impress me in certain ways. Howard Waldrop comes to mind.

Growing up, what were your biggest influences?

I guess from the way I turned out, it would have to have been the science fiction of the '40s, '50s and '60s. People like Heinlein, Zelazny and Delany probably influenced me a great deal more than I know.

So how have these influences made Walter Jon Williams the man he is today?

Let me use the metaphor of the daemones from *Aristoi*. I have a great many daemones in my head, and each one has its own voice and interests and authorities. And all of them are authors. So if you want to know what influences me, read my books. It's all there, because if it's important, it'll turn up in the fiction sooner or later. **IZ**

Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer



As the sun was still struggling valiantly over the horizon, Wilson was awoken by a pair of uniformed SAC lieutenants who had materialized inside his bedroom.

"Let me guess," he croaked. "You're the Spirit of Christmas Past, and *you* must be Christmas Yet to Come."

"Affirmatively not, sir," said the first lieutenant with the laugh-a-minute humour for which SAC lieutenants were famed. "We've been detailed to take you to Cheyenne Mountain."

"How did you guys get into the house, anyway?"

"We had to break down your door, disable your burglar alarm and shoot your guard dog, sir. And tie your wife up and leave her in the airing cupboard. Believe me, sir, we wouldn't resort to such drastic measures were this not a matter of the Gravest National Security."

"The Iraqis got hold of a secret Nazi nerve-gas stockpile again?"

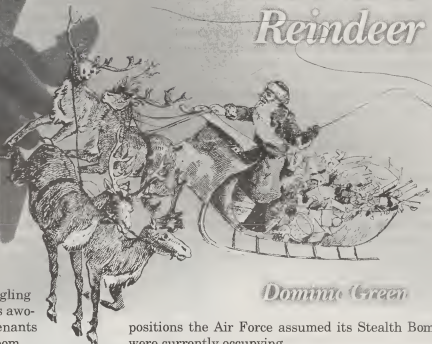
The Lieutenant shook his head.

"Another UFO crashed in New Mexico?"

"I must indicate a negative response to that question, sir."

"Hmm." Wilson pulled on his fluffy bedroom slippers. "I must admit, Lieutenant Keefauver, that you have aroused my curiosity. Go out into the garage and warm up my Probe. I will be out once I have donned the uniform."

The screen was large, occupying most of one wall. It had to be. On the screen was depicted the entire sprawling expanse of the continental United States. Above the continental United States, a series of scarcely-moving red, blue and yellow dots represented every single scheduled military, commercial and private flight being tracked by radar inside US airspace. Further south, towards New Mexico, magenta dots of UFOs buzzed round like angry bees; above Arizona, small green dots represented the



Dominic Green

positions the Air Force assumed its Stealth Bombers were currently occupying.

All was not as it should be, however.

Bang in the centre of the display, a small black dot had appeared, not yet over CONUS, but well into Canada, progressing rapidly southward toward Winnipeg at an appreciable percentage of the speed of sound. The display had drawn the black dot beautifully, with panache and resolution; after all, it had been designed to draw thousands of the things coming menacingly over the Pole, and had never been given the chance. Now, here was a Black Dot coming menacingly south from the direction of the Pole in exactly the same way the display had been designed for, and it drew the dot with relish.

Wilson was annoyed. His Probe had not made the base in record time today. "Do we have a visual on the Bogeys yet?"

"That's a negative, sir. One of our F-15s is closing to within hailing distance, and should be able to provide a positive identification."

General Wilson licked his lips in warlike anticipation. What would it be? A Mig-59 "Fistfuck" pilot, defecting from the defunct Former Soviet Union for the price of a US passport and one square meal a day? A European airliner with a malfunctioning transponder, filled with innocent civilians whose lives it was now up to Wilson to save? Or (O joy of joys) a rogue "Badass" bomber crew, hardline old-school communists all, bent on the destruction of the United States of America and the plunging of the world into nuclear war?

"We've got a visual report coming in from our F-15 pilot now, sir."

"Lay it on me, Sergeant."

"You're through to the pilot now, sir."

A lone pilot's voice, high in the sky above the frozen wastes of Canada, crackled through the intercom, heard by everyone in the Strategic Command Center. Wilson picked up the microphone and spoke into it with a calm that he knew everyone in the room admired.

"OK, Son, now, let's say you tell us what you can see up there."

"...Maybe he don't show up on infrared at *all*... Lord in Heaven, I see it now. It's a sleigh, an old guy on a reindeer-drawn sleigh, with a big white beard, and a red coat, and he's carrying a sack, and..."

"Oh, my God. *It's full of presents!*"

The General ground his teeth grimly. "Sweet Jesus. PULL OUT, SON! PULL OUT!"

The intercom choked on a mess of static, and the F-15 light above Winnipeg winked out.

The falling star fell to earth above Indigence, Minnesota, blazing red and white as a supernova over Bethlehem. Mr Norman Gropius, a self-confessed Meteorological Expert, saw it fall. He knew that it would fall where it fell, and so set off to that location in his gumboots. Before long, he came to a huge smoking crater, strewn with shattered sleigh-runners and pieces of antler, and smelling unaccountably of venison. The trees around were festooned with brightly-coloured wrapping paper.

Then, as Mr Gropius watched, a rotund, red-coated figure with a heavily-singed beard climbed out of the pit, raised itself to its full height (which was not dissimilar to its full width) and pointed at Gropius accusingly.

"Norman Schwarzkopf Gropius, bad little boy of Indigence, Minnesota, guilty of beating his wife, driving while inebriated, drinking excessive amounts of home-brewed rotgut, and hanging out beside crossroads waiting to expose himself to passing busloads of schoolgirls. No presents for you, sonny."

Gropius hung his head in shame.

"Now – first of all, how'd you know I'd be here?"

Gropius brightened. "I am a Meteorological Expert."

"Meteorology is weather, boy. Meteorites is astronomy."

"Ah. In that case, I'm not really sure."

"Well, in any case, help me get these presents out of here before they get here." The figure wandered around the clearing vainly attempting to collect up presents into a sack which had no bottom. "The hundredth run I've done this century, and suddenly I find out I'm visible on radar." It rubbed the seat of its bright-red velvet pants. "Goddamned ejector seat."

"You've been shot down with bullets of ten-millimetre calibre," said Gropius, eyeing the holes in the side of Santa's sleigh. "This is a great honour. Some presidents are only shot at with point-two-two."

The fat figure nodded. "Basically, the problem is, Too Many Folks Believe in Me These Days. You can't see on radar what you don't believe in. Nobody ever used to believe in the Tooth Fairy, or the Loch Ness Monster either. But these days, folks believe in *everything*, up to and including Presidential Election promises. It's scandalous. Personally, I blame Hollywood. Take you. You can

see me. You believe in me."

"Of course," said Gropius. "I am a Psychiatry Expert. You would be described by the Jungian school as a figment of the collective unconscious, which as Jung is keen to point out does not make you Any Less Real."

The figure kicked a large fluffy bunny protruding from one ripped-open present package. "Stop that! Stop that, that Jungian talk! It's dirty, that's what it is! And besides, psychiatry is the Clinical Treatment of Crazy Persons. Figments of the collective unconscious are psychology. I'm Father Fucking Christmas and don't you forget it. Otherwise –" and here the rotund figure's eyes filled with real fear – "I might *disappear*."

Gropius looked up into the heavens. "They are close. I saw three military helicopters on the way here, and much wreckage which, if my *Observer's Book of Things That Fly and Kill* does not deceive me, was that of an F-15 Interceptor."

The rotund old gentleman peered into the dark woods nervously. "Ha! I don't care much about them heavily-armed military types. It's the Sasquatches I'm worried about. Folk shouldn't believe in them either, but they do. Trouble is, they believe in them Big and Mean and Nasty, and they believe in me Old and Fat and Unarmed. Let's get outta here and into a McDonald's. Folks never believe in Sasquatches in McDonald's. That is, unless they get to thinking too hard about what their burger's made of."

"Good morning," said Gropius. "I will have one Big Mac for myself, and one Super Value Disney Seven Samurai Sushi Meal for Santa Claus, who is accompanying me."

"Ssssh, son, you'll give the game away," said Santa Claus.

"Of course he is," said the assistant, belying his five gold stars for Customer Service, and looking past Santa Claus at the empty air. "Hi there, Santa."

"Hi there," said Santa Claus. "If only everyone were so incredulous as you. Aren't you a little *old* for working in a burger franchise? Shit, there are kids in here."

"Hey, mom," said a small child being led in through the swing doors. "Is that Santa Claus?"

"Why, no, honey," replied Mom. "That's just an old drunk guy who smells faintly of urine."

Gropius tipped his Coors cap at Mom politely. Meanwhile, Santa Claus was still staring suspiciously at the assistant.

"GOD!" he said.

The assistant tore off his fake false chin, revealing a distinctive majestic flowing white beard.

"Myself, damn it! I knew I should've gone to Burger King."

The two Figments of the Collective Unconscious squared up to one another, as if competing in the All-Minnesota Large Impressive White Beard Competition. "I gotta bone to pick with You," said Santa Claus. "Two thousand years ago, I'm a peaceful pagan Saturnalian feast metaphor, then POW! Suddenly I end up in this getup surrounded by elves and artiodactyls, at the North Pole where I have to Commute to Work."

"You got it lucky, young figment-me-lad," rejoined God. "You should try being a healthy young Solar Personification beaming down on the banks of the River Nile

when some Atenist lunatic decides to invent Monotheism. BANG! Big beard, cloud, halo, the works."

"What are you doing here?" said Gropius. "Shouldn't You be – well, everywhere?"

"This is McDonald's," said God. "No one believes in God in here."

"I can see You," said Gropius. "Only sort of faintly. I can see the wall through You."

"Ah," said God, "an agnostic." He looked around nervously. "Good job there aren't any Minoans in here. It's a helluva job keeping track of those darn great Horns sticking out of your head. I used to have a job in a china shop in Knossos. Never again."

"Hey, mister," said the kid, undaunted by its mother. "Who's the weird guy on the big floating cloud? Is he Ronald McDonald?"

"My, my," said God. "What *do* they teach them at Sunday Schools nowadays. You wanna see Ronald McDonald, kid? Look out the window."

The kid turned round. It looked out the window. It started screaming wildly and uncontrollably.

"What's wrong, honey?" said Mom. "There's nothing out there; just Dark Lonely Woods."

The kid screamed louder. As it screamed, Gropius and Santa Claus watched the cartoon clown being torn limb from red and yellow limb by ravening proto-Neanderthals.

"Why didn't he stay indoors?" said Gropius. "He'd have been safe."

"He'd have been recognized," said Santa. "Too many of Santa's Little Helpers in here believe in him." He sucked on his root beer thoughtfully.

A greasy trail of hot processed parmesan slid down the window as the sasquatches tore off Mayor McCheese's Sesame Seed Buns. Gropius nodded sagely as he noticed that they left his Dill Pickle totally untouched.

"You got to admit, it's a hell of a coincidence," said Santa, leaning on the counter. "The four of us being in here at the same time."

Suddenly, the swing doors of the restaurant whooshed open-and-shut, and every teacup in the establishment rattled on its saucer. The lights dimmed and flickered, the espresso dispenser went haywire, and announcers on the radio began talking backwards in Hungarian. Santa, God and Gropius squinted into the landing lights of something huge and highly tangible landing in the parking lot outside.

"An olive-drab UFO," said Santa. "With US AIR FORCE written down the side."

"Aha," said God. "That distinguishes it from the ones flown by the Brazilians and Chinese."

Troops poured from the UFO, thundering into the franchise, M16s at the ready. Within seconds, the entire diner was filled with soldiers dressed in bright red and yellow camouflage, led by a sinister dark-suited figure wearing sunglasses.

"A special, highly trained unit," said the figure. "Developed specifically to deal with the possibility of infantry combat inside a McDonald's franchise. They have trained for years for this moment." It extended a hand. "I represent Uncle Sam, gentlemen."

"I am Santa Claus," said Santa Claus. "I acknowledge no authority save the democratically-elected government of Greenland."

"How come they can see us?" said God, squinting the wrong way up a dozen M16 barrels.

"These are US Marines," said the thin apparition, more than a little put out. "They have been specially trained to believe in Santa and God. Just north of here is a Top Secret Federal Installation where military personnel are taught to believe in the Devil. Further to the east is a separate complex where trained field chaplains learn to accept the reality of Great Cthulhu."

Santa looked at God. God folded his arms peremptorily. "Don't look at me. I never mentioned him once. They invented him all by themselves."

"Satan and Cthulhu escaped from a clandestine government installation in Nevada two weeks ago," continued the government man, "shackled to one another with leg-irons of adamant. The last time they were seen by trained observers, they were arguing vigorously over who was the Ultimate Evil in the Universe."

God looked around himself pensively. "There is a top-secret government installation dedicated to the capture of Figments of the Collective Unconscious?"

"Absolutely right, Mr Almighty, sir. You would not have shown up on radar had our operators not relayed the altitude and vector of Your Divine Merkava to Strategic Air Command."

"So I suppose these soldiers have been specially trained to believe in everything they're told, right?"

"That is correct, sir. We have to keep the *National Enquirer* away from them at bedtime. If You move, they will sense You and shoot."

"Aha, well, in that case..." God looked up and over the soldiers' heads. "GOLLY! THAT'S THE BIGGEST GODDAMN TYRANNOSAURUS I EVER DID SEE!"

As one, the soldiers turned and fired at the giant Mesozoic lizard, which had plunged its head down through the flimsy roof of the restaurant's eating area, scattering roofing tiles everywhere. As a general gun-vs-teeth battle ensued, the two Figments ran from the building, accompanied by Gropius and the dark-suited gentleman, who hurled himself into the back of the UFO with them, shouldering sasquatches out of the way and slamming the door on US Soldiers Missing In Action.

"Mission accomplished with maximal casualties! Let's get outta here!" he yelled to the pilot, who appeared to be dressed in a tall stripy hat decorated with blue and white stars.

Santa Claus looked at the pilot oddly. "Who's that?" he said. "And how come you didn't get eaten by the Tyrannosaurus?"



The dark-suited gentleman smiled. "Come now, Mr Claus," he said. "Don't you recognize one of the Men In Black when you see one? And when I said I worked for Uncle Sam, I meant it."

The tall, white-bearded figure seated before a Macintosh spliced into the incomprehensible alien controls waved cheerily.

"We've been using the US Government as mere pawns in our evil grasp to get all of us figments together for quite some time," said the Man In Black. "This problem of increasing collective consensual mass hallucination concerns us all. It is our belief that a blow needs to be struck for the forces of Incredulity and Doubt worldwide. Otherwise policemen, priests and store detectives may begin to believe in us, and you know what *that* would mean. No more goosing the waitresses in KFC. No more running naked across the Mormon Tabernacle shouting 'Come Out And Fight, Brigham Young, You Faggot.' Yes, God, You were seen and recognized. And every single little idea and misconception forced into people's unconscious minds, walking the streets at midday. Captain America. The Bogyman. Mighty Morphin Power Persons."

"But who or what is to blame?" said God. "Things never used to be like this. I used to be able to move mysteriously among mortals at My leisure."

"Children," said Santa with utter venom. "Children believe everything they're told. And this modern MTV society worships children, holds them up as little evil demigods who are the centre of their poor parents' universes." His lips quivered with distaste. "They are positively *encouraged* to believe in the Easter Bunny."

"Hush your mouth," said a large, long-eared, lovable bundle of fur sitting in the copilot's seat.

"Then," said Santa enthusiastically. "We shall wipe out children! We shall go forth, and purge them from the kindergartens of America." He produced a pump action shotgun from his sack of presents, and chambered a cartridge.

"Where did you get that?" said God with concern.

"Every militia member in Texas has a mother," said Santa, wiping a tear from his eye.

Gropius put up a hand. "Erm - excuse me, Mr Claus, but there may be a flaw in your argument; for if we wipe out the children and leave only the parents, will the parents not merely breed again and produce more children?"

"Then," said God with a crazed glint in his third eye, "we will wipe out the parents! Then the children will all die out eventually, as they are below child-bearing age."

Gropius put down his hand again with a confused expression.

"I feel," said the Man In Black, "that our goals may be realized without resorting to such drastic measures. All that is needed is for the world's children to be Cruelly Disillusioned in some way. Can you provide us with input in this direction, Claus? You're our Small Child Specialist."

Santa thought for a moment. "Well," he said, "They get really pissed when they don't get the presents they want on C-Day." He thought for a moment more. "But I couldn't deliver the wrong presents... I just couldn't do it..." He sat staring into space by the window, murmuring to himself.

"Claus can't do it," echoed Sam. "Any more than I could sell Nuclear Secrets to the Soviets."

"Besides, where would we get a new sleigh and reindeer?" said God.

"That's the easy part." Sam pressed the Apple button on his Macintosh, and a huge screen lit up on one wall. The assembled Figments of the Collective Human Imagination gasped in awe.

"She's big," said God. "She's fast, and by the cut of those reindeer's fetlocks, she could outrun a Patriot Missile."

"The only drawback," said the living embodiment of the United States of America, "is that she's in London. In Harrod's Toy Department in a special display in the Vastly Expensive Arab Children's Section. Swarming with Small Child security every hour of the day and night, and all the new kids on the block that entails. Mighty Morphin Biker Street Sharks from Saturn, Teenage Mutant Ninja animals of every biological phylum, even -" his voice lowered to an ominous whisper - "*Sylvanian Families*. Also, this year, Hasbro are rumoured to be releasing Przwalski's My Little Pony, which kills and eats reindeer on sight. If small kids catch sight of the sleigh before we're airborne, we'll all be venison in unison."

"I can get a man in there," said the Man In Black. "That's my strength. Belief in me presupposes that I'm Never to Be Found When Looked For." He looked doubtful for a moment. "I may leave a few mysterious radiation burns on the carpets and oddly mutilated cattle, however."

"It's not the getting in there that worries me," said God. "It's the getting out."

Sam nodded. "We need a Hoofed Animal pilot. And we need one fast."

"Don't worry," said the Man In Black. "I know where we can find the best Hoofed Animal pilot in the business."

They were coming for him again. He could hear dull distant detonations, as of giants big as mountains shrugging off glaciers and lumbering tectonically to the attack, as of serpents coiling throttling round the world, as of wolves the size of constellations howling at the sun.

He had to make it to the Magic Castle. He would be safe in there. He had a sword taped underneath the third storey machicolations with which to Smite anyone who threatened to Believe in him. Nearly there - through the kitchen, shouldering small children and huge mansized Mickey Mice out of the way, babbling in Old Norse - nearly there -

"Hey, Mister! Easy on the ears!"

"Sorry, Mr Mouse, Sir. I didn't realize that one was Really You."

"This is the only place I can hide nowadays. Giant Cartoon Mice can't get jobs at Burger King."

The World-Tree was in danger yet again. Why oh why hadn't he taken a job so near to it? From his position atop the frontal battlements he could see its every angel, fairy light and bauble, from the Christian Tinkerbell perched on the top of it where Asgard should be by rights, down to the huge barrel, big as a cannibal's cauldron, where he suspected the serpent Nidhogg to be gnawing at its roots. He tore the sword loose from its mounting and held it

tight before him, hardly aware of how to use it after a thousand years of idleness. The thunder in the sky was getting louder, and he retreated into a corner holding the sword in shaking fingers. "By myself and Thor!" he yelled, and scattered a sales staffer's tray of I LOVE MICKEY badges with the point of his sword. He seized up the tray and began chewing on it vigorously. "WITNESS ME COVER MYSELF IN BLOOD AND GLORY!" he cried unintelligibly, spitting out wood, blood and small metal pins. They had been bound to come and find him, even here –

The thunder in the heavens beat in on his eardrums, and plastic fairy battlements melted as a mysterious olive-drab frisbee-shaped object descended from the sky, scattering radiation diamond-hard in all directions.

A shining silver ramp extruded from the vehicle, and a Man In Black walked down it. As the Man In Black did so, the man on the battlements was struggling out of his T-shirt.

"Good morning, Mr Odin, sir. I represent Uncle Sam."

"He's got Post-Ragnarok Stress Disorder," said Sam. "He'll never make it. Thor's the same. Lives in northern latitudes now, because every time he sees a snake, eel, caterpillar or earthworm he regresses into combat mode. He had a job as a golf course attendant. Every morning after a spring shower the putting greens were covered in gigantic hammer blows half a mile wide."

"We have these men to thank," said the Man In Black. "Were it not for men like him, we would all be hiding in rat-holes in the walls of giants' caves. We have a duty to offer him gainful employment, God, saving Your presence, sir, dammit."

"I can do it," said the bearded figure sitting in the UFO's hold, half wearing a MAIN STREET USA T-shirt.

"Beg pardon, Mr Odin?" said Sam.

"I can do it. I can Save the World." His nostrils quivered proudly. "I dimly remember having done it once before, and I can do it again."

Gropius was not quite sure whether this was a trick of the light, but horns appeared to be sprouting from a helmet Odin had not had before. He stood up, now cloaked in the skin of some vast prehistoric animal, and began to do Vigorous Physical Jerks. Having finished his jerks, he spat on his hands, took hold of his sword, and commenced a few practice strokes around the hold. Finally, he turned round to God, Sam, and the Man, his one eye gleaming with the excitement of an old God learning new tricks.

"Right," he said. "I'm ready. But on one condition."

"Name it."

"I want my Old Team, and as much mead as I can quaff. And I ain't wearing no mink and crush velvet neither."

As Odin walked forward to the pilot's compartment, the Man In Black took hold of his arm.

"Odin. Can you fly those reindeer? Really fly them?"

The Norse God spat in warlike fashion, and a section of the pilot's console evaporated.

"If it's got hooves, I can fly it."

The Old Team were a sad and sorry bunch, but as their leader passed in the glittering UFO, they suddenly seemed to straighten, their paunches to migrate to their arms and turn to muscle, their flabby white flesh to harden into the battle-scars of Ragnarok. Thor had got religion, and was working in an Evangelical Mission to the Goddess in Igloolik.

"If I had a hammerrr – I'd hammer in the morn- ingggg –"

"You have a Hammer now, old friend."

"BY THE SPUN-GOLD TRESSES OF SIF! WHAT THE HEL AM I DOING HERE? WHY AM I WEARING THESE SANDALS?"

Tiw, meanwhile, was playing a highly realistic Captain Hook in a Brechtian production of *Peter Pan* then showing at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London. Just as he was launching into his final dramatic monologue, in which he blamed the parents of the Lost Boys for removing an adult maternal gestalt from their lives, leaving only the tyrannical Oedipal father figure which he, Hook, was tragically bound to become, the stage door was barged in and the auditorium filled with Teutonic Gods and Christmas Personifications. The critic from the *Times* described the evening as "Confused in Plotline, but Superb for stage effects."

Loki had turned to alcoholism. Heimdall was living in a cardboard box on Easter Island, at the geographical antipodes of Scandinavia. Frey had come to realize he was a Valkyrie born in a god's body and had taken to hanging around street corners doing favours for giants. But all, as one god, at the approach of their ancient commander, grew huge and glittering mail-shirts, then tore them aside naked and berserk for battle, gnawing on their shields, barstools and toilet seats.

It was a not entirely unremarked Norse Horde that tramped through the entrance to Harrod's that crisp morning of 24th December. Store security and shop-floor assistants alike gave the horned gods astonished glances, then, realizing that these were evidently part of a display somewhere in the cavernous store, turned back to the business of ignoring Saudi shoplifters without concern. Frey was asked to check in his handbag.

In disguise, each and every one dressed as a Muslim woman in heavy purdah, their black silk head-dresses snagging on the enormous horns of their helmets, the divine contingent proceeded to the Toy Department without undue incident, though the blind god Hod smelled mistletoe and had to be dragged away from tearing a display down with his teeth.

And there it was. Sleek, glittering, mounted on razor-edged runners. Pulled by real reindeer around whose bottoms YTS trainees were milling, trowels at the ready, in a vain hope to convince any who might visit the display that reindeer's bowels operated on caseless ammunition.



A large white ticket was attached to the great brass lantern on the sledge's offside driver door: SOLD TO THE EMIR OF KUWAIT. Around the sleigh, invisible to all but the credulous minds of children, prowled life-size plastic apparitions and aberrations, animal-headed, strongman-bodied, like Egyptian deities.

"The Egyptian Gods were the same, old wives' tales until Zoser brought out the first jointed Anubis action doll," whispered God helpfully. "Then all Heaven broke loose."

"How are we going to get past this lot?" said Tiw. "They outnumber us twenty to one." A thought crossed his mind, like a fish flopping across the desert. "I could put my hand in their mouths and promise we won't steal the sleigh if you like."

"Won't work on Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, Mr Tiw, sir," said the Man In Black. "Oddly enough, they view intruders thrusting hands into their mouths as an overtly hostile act. However, we do have a scenario envisaged whereby we may gain access to the sled. Since the majority of these moulded plastic figments depend on television airtime for their credibility, their manufacturers, in order to obtain airtime, are bound to insist that each and every one of them be fearless and honourable battlers against evil in its every form—"

"So how does that help us?" said Thor.

"We have left Santa Claus in the vestibule," said Sam, "with orders to kick the crutch out from under the first cripple he sees, then run out of the building shouting 'DEATH TO ORPHANS.' With any luck, every single one of these fearless crusaders will pile on top of him and beat him senseless, as would be unthinkable on a Family Show. Meanwhile, we will be piling into the sleigh and engaging Supersonic Dasher – and I think I hear him now."

There came the sound of a chubby Greenlander being crushed under several hundredweight of rippling-muscle polypropylene. The fearsome monstrosities about the Christmas Display sniffed the air, took to the various oddly-shaped Accessory Vehicles which they all seemed to possess, and roared out of the room with Realistic Friction Sound. Instantly, the Norse Gods shed their purdah and sped towards the undefended sleigh, much to the amazement of onlooking children. Odin leapt onto the driver's seat and took hold of the reins, raising his horn, surrounded by Vanir in Santa Claus outfits and false white beards strapped to their real beards with elastic.

He blew the horn.

The horn! It resounded like a tectonic shock, made Giants stir with the pain of old remembered battle wounds in caves deep underground, and shook avalanches from mountainsides. It gave men, women and children wicked dreams, and roused them from those wicked dreams before they quite wanted to be roused, and made dogs leap up and run round barking in confusion. And then, a minute after the horn, came the Wild Reindeer Sleigh Hunt hurtling across the sky. And whatever child had been bad enough to stay up late watching the booby trap carefully attached to the mince pie left at the bottom of the chimney was bound to be pulled bodily onto a flying reindeer by malicious Elves and join the

Hunt as it careered onwards, *vrolling* onto house roofs in the cut-glass air of that winter's night as a fat, bearded, jolly, but abnormally fearsome Santa Claus squatted over each chimney in turn and did an extra special present down the flue. And the Elves sang ancient Viking sagas from the days before they had ceased employment as fierce prowlers of the Halloween night and entered the employ of Mr Claus and the authors of the Magnolia Fairy Book, and undergone Corrective Ear Surgery. Drunks, policemen, night-watchmen, burglars, and insomniacs held on to the runners of the sleigh and dangled from the bellies of the reindeer, yelling and shouting bloodthirsty Nordic Yuletide slogans they never knew they knew. All about, the Wild Huntsmen rode their antlered steeds with the stoic indifference of Viking warriors doing their best with the tools available, and looked askance with expressions of confusion at their semi-stark-naked leader, beard and red-and-ermine coat flying off his berserk nudity in the winter wind.

"COME PRANCER! COME DANCER! COME SLEIPNIR AND BLITZEN!"

Rudolph could hardly keep up with the huge, dark, multi-legged, only superficially reindeer-resembling steed lashed to the front of the sleigh. The Elves, remembering the days when they had been allowed, nay, even encouraged, by men's minds to be malicious, read each child's letter of requisition carefully and stuffed inside each little boy's and girl's Christmas stocking a dead mouse and the note THAT'S ALL YER GETTIN, SQUIRT. SIGNED, YER MUM AND DAD. Dog-eared copies of *Playboy* found their way into the stockings of curates; copies of the *Church Times* found their way into the stockings of those who did not appreciate a publication too large to be read with one hand free.

"We are drawing close to the Anomaly!" yelled Sam above the screams of the Valkyries. The sled was climbing steeply now, into a purpling sky; voices were becoming shriller, and stars sharper, and a great sound filled the ears of Odin's Little Helpers, as if the very sky were a diaphragm contracting and retracting, pushed by a pump big enough to drive a universe.

"What's that noise?" yelled Odin, looking around nervously for Frost Giants.

"Heartbeat," said the Man In Black. "We were afraid of this. We are, as you know, all Figments of Mankind's Collective Unconscious. Most of Mankind's Collective Unconscious is shaped by Childhood Trauma, based around arrestation of the various stages of Sexual Development – Oral, Anal, Phallic, Oedipal, and so forth. Due to our modern society's foolhardy trust in the basic innocence of Children, such Figments have recently been seen swarming in the streets. These, however, we can deal with. This is something new altogether; possibly a result of playing Womb Music to Unborn Babies."

"You don't mean –" said Loki, awoken from his sherry stupor by shock.

"I do," said the Man In Black. "We are looking at Sexual Development traumatized at the prenatal stage."

"What's that eerie keening sound?" said Heimdall.

"Whale song," said Sam, through clenched teeth, grimly.

The world had collapsed to a single glutinous shell, and the sleigh slid as if through treacle, slowly. Dim light shone in through venous membranes painted on the sky. Occasional enormous fibre optics, obstetric forceps, and Gigantic Gynaecological Hands reared and thrashed like serpents. Odin obligingly covered Thor's eyes.

"What are we going to do?" said God, peering around in fear.

"We're going to find the Prenatal Trauma Figment, drag it into daylight, and smack it till it screams."

"My God! It's massive!"

"It's only just smaller than the entire Local Group of Galaxies," said Sam. "It's the unborn child's erroneous concept of itself, filling up its own observable universe. Waking up foetal consciousness before birth using music was a very bad idea. If more and more children are maltreated in such a manner, the Figment may grow so large that it causes the entire cosmos to contract into a Primal Atom."

"How can the Earth survive being so close to it?" said the Easter Bunny.

"The Earth isn't close to it. The Earth is inside it; it and a million other solar systems," said The Man In Black. And indeed, as Gropius looked, he could see a myriad tiny twinkling lights glittering under the child's translucent skin. "We are only able to survive in such proximity to the Infantile Event Horizon due to the devout belief of thousands of Christian theologians that God is Outside Time."

God, who had been sitting in the back of the sleigh Out Of It for the last several hours, flushed with modest pride.

"Watch out! It's kicking!"

A leg the size of a spiral arm flung out from the body of the creature, and the sleigh swerved deftly to avoid it, becoming momentarily more massive on one side and drawing its passengers to the left under the influence of gravity.

"How can we move such a mass?" cried Thor. "It's a million times bigger than the Midgard Serpent, and that was a bugger to lift!"

"Then we need a lever one million and one metres long," said Gropius. "And a fulcrum, of course."

"We cannot move it," said Sam. "We'll only move the Earth with it. All we can do is attempt to shrink it to a more manageable size. Convince all the currently unborn children that a world exists outside the wall of the womb."

A party of Elves stood up on the sleigh's runners and saluted.

"This group of Trained Assault Elves have the objective of replacing all currently-circulating versions of Womb Music for the Unborn Child and replacing them with a specially-doctored version containing Subliminal Messages to Warp and Distort the Tiny Imagination. The proud parents will think they are playing the child Humpbacked Whales Singing to One Another in the Hawaiian Dusk, but in reality what the child hears is—" He clicked his fingers. An Elf pressed a button on a tape

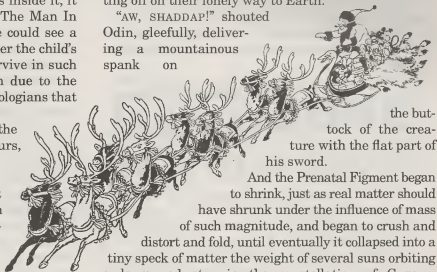
recorder, which shouted, "HEY! HEY, YOU IN THERE! YOU THINK THIS IS ALL THERE IS? YOU GOT IT CUSHY IN THERE, BELIEVE ME! DON'T COME OUT, IT'S COLD AND THEY'LL CUT YOUR THING OFF!"

Sam saluted to the Elves. "Some of you Elves may not return; but whether you return or no, the World will remember that whilst you lived, by God, you Elves were Elves." A green light blinked on the side of the sleigh, and the Elves spread their wings and flopped backwards off the runners, spreading tiny silvery wings against the ionic winds of space.

Abruptly, many minutes after the Elfin Vanguard had vanished into the babyish bulk of the Trauma Figment, stars began to shake and constellations to quiver in their courses. Galaxies were dashed down from the sky, and the thin film of air around the Earth sang like a bell as the Prenatal Trauma Figment screamed like a million supernovas. Alien civilizations believed in by millions perished in that awful detonation; Planet Ogatta and the Homeworld of the Greys were wiped across the burning faces of their suns like silicon sludge, necessitating fleets of giant Interplanetary Motherships setting off on their lonely way to Earth.

"AW, SHADDAP!" shouted

Odin, gleefully, delivering a mountainous spank on



the buttock of the creature with the flat part of his sword.

And the Prenatal Figment began to shrink, just as real matter should have shrunk under the influence of mass of such magnitude, and began to crush and distort and fold, until eventually it collapsed into a tiny speck of matter the weight of several suns orbiting a large red star in the constellation of Cygnus. Astronomers firmly believing in the existence of such specks looked up from the Earth with their telescopes and saw the star, and were convinced that it had always been there, and would be for a billion years to come.

The morning after.

Odin sat, in sunglasses, in one corner of a rockers' café in Amsterdam, where huge fat bearded men in horned helmets were merely a part of the scenery. Around him sat his divine cohorts, bits of mince pie and soot in their sherry-stained beards. Nearby, Santa's Elves had passed out on tiny chairs and tables filched from the doll's house section of the nearby Rijksmuseum. It was a wonder that the clientele could not see them. But of course, Gropius told himself, the Elves were invisible. Nobody believed in Santa's Elves any more. Nobody believed in Santa any more, after the events of the night before. Santa had been seen all round the world by Little Children everywhere, standing in the middle of bedrooms yelling, "HI KIDS! I'M REALLY YOUR DAD!," swaying, vomiting, waving a spear

around dangerously, and vowing to give the Frost Giants a damn good thrashing if they ever came near Asgard again. Parents had rushed into children's bedrooms all over the world, only to find Santa gone, and the children huddling terrified in a pool of divine urine.

"It *wasn't* us who peed on the floor; it was SANTA, Mom-meeee -"

"Stop telling lies, Delphine, you know Bad Little Children Don't Get Any Presents."

"It *wasn't* Santa, it was Daddy, he *said* he was Daddy! I hate you, Daddy! There is no Santa Claus, and no God, and no Uncle Sam either! I no longer want to be the First Ballerina in Space when I grow up! I want to be a Math Teacher!"

Through the window, Santa - heavily-bandaged, with severe Dino-Rider injuries - sat beaming, watching the children burn effigies of himself in the streets. Next to him, God sat doodling "REFORMED AND TURNED TO JESUS" on the back of a Hell's Angel who was completely oblivious of his presence. Next to him, Uncle Sam, who had exchanged clothes with Odin in a moment of camaraderie, sat snoring under a winged steel helmet inscribed JOTUNHEIM OR BUST. Abruptly, however, kicked awake by the Man In Black, who was watching his UFO concernedly out of the window, Sam rose to a round of spectral applause completely ignored by all the habitués of the café.

"Fellow Figments," he began. "I feel that we are finally safe from the depredations of the Atomic Age of Faith. We have not undergone such a Time of Trial since the dark days of the Middle Ages, when all Europe and Arabia believed in God, and he could not walk down a thoroughfare in Mecca without being arrested for being an illegal representation of himself. How did we deal with this assault? By bombarding that poor deluded Mr Darwin with giant tortoises, dodos and marine iguanas, in order to convince Man that the world had been created in a billion years rather than a week. It is true that humans have been getting cleverer. They have spotted the fact that we forgot to lay down a Missing Link, and that hurried sawn-off chimp we placed in the spoil heap at Piltown did not help matters. Nevertheless, today we have struck at the Real Meaning of Christmas, a far more radical aspect of society than any mere Deity, and I feel that no mere mortal will be able to see us on a radar scope for many years to come."

"HEY! JEHOVAH! QUIT DRAWING ON MY BACK!" said the Hell's Angel.

The entire room - apart from the human content of the room, who sat drinking beer and one another's urine as before - sat speechless. Jehovah sat back feeling for a flick-thunderbolt in his boot uncertainly, for the Angel's human outline could only be vaguely guessed at through a covering of chain scars, body piercings, ritual cicatrices and tattoos.

"And who would you be, sir?" said Sam.

The vile entity grinned. Its teeth had been filed into points and capped with steel. "I'm the Evil Bad Hell's Angel who Lives to Rape, and Rapes to Live," said the Evil Hell's Angel. "This here is the Nice, Good Hell's Angel

who is Merely a Misunderstood Rebel Against the Sinister Forces of Conformity in Our Society." He indicated a smiling young man dressed in shiny new leathers on the other side of the table. "Neither of us truly exists, but both of us are fervently believed in by large sections of the population. Yesterday, our Volvo was stopped three times by traffic cops. Today, we can pull wheelies through St Peter's Basilica without receiving so much as a speeding ticket. From the bottom of our hearts, kind sirs, thank you." He bowed to Odin, who returned the compliment graciously.

Meanwhile, unregarded by all, Norman Gropius sat drinking.

"You're one of us," said the Minor Aesir.

"Correct, except in so far as I am not one of the lesser post-Ragnarok deities of the Norse pantheon, but rather Norman Schwarzkopf Gropius of 2113, One-and-Only Road, Indigence, Minnesota," answered Gropius accurately.

"So what do you do?" said the Minor Aesir to Gropius. "Lightning? Sunshine?" Then, looking Gropius up and down somewhat dubiously, "Fertility?"

"At present I am standing here talking to you. Simultaneously, however, I am sitting by the fire in my trailer-park home reading the *Everyman's Guide to Atomic Energy* and crossing out the bits with which I disagree. Due to quite monstrous self-conceit, I believe myself to be an expert on Entomology, Campanology, Vulcanicity, Synchronicity, Nutrition, Dentition, Unarmed Combat, Automobile Maintenance, Home Improvement and the Tender Hearts of Women. Hence I am all these things, whilst simultaneously being a rather sad old fuck in a superannuated fur hat."

"Wotan be buggered! All I can do is Hit Things With a Big Sword."

"Thank you. Incidentally, you don't want to quaff your mead like that. It's not authentically proto-Teutonic."

The gigantic horned form stared into its wassailing tankard in confusion.

"Things had become bad for me," continued Gropius unsolicited. "My alter ego kept walking into town on its own and performing miraculous feats of omniscience, and other people started to Believe in me. They would say things like, That Old Norm, He's a Sly One, He Done Performed Keyhole Brain Surgery on My Heifer Mirabelle Last Fall. There's Even Folks as Say He Can Make His Ass Whistle The Stars and Stripes Forever. And you know as well as I know that as soon as folks start to Believe in you, a world of trouble starts. I couldn't stop my ass whistling. I had to give the poor old girl a painless and brilliantly skilful laryngectomy. And once NASA started sending guys round asking to look at my Reactionless Wood-Burning Perpetual Motion Stove, I knew it was time to get all the imaginary guys together and cut Mr Know-It-All - that is to say, me - down to size so I could drink myself - that is to say, himself - sick on Coors in peace. Though personally, being a connoisseur of fine wines, I of course prefer a good Chateau Imaginaire any day." He reached over to a bottle that had just appeared in front of him in a puff of green smoke and filled his glass generously.

"You arranged all of this?"

"Of course," said Gropius. "I am well versed in the Machiavellian Arts. My Tentacles are Everywhere, and I sit like a Spider in the centre of a Web of my own Nefarious Devising. The last three U.S. Presidents have been my creatures."

"Y'don't say!"

"Is it not true that the flicker of a butterfly's wing can cause Hurricanes and Significant Alterations in Presidential Elections? It is also written that a choice word on a war can immobilize an entire Armoured Division. Prior to the last Presidential Election, I travelled to Omaha, Nebraska, and wrote the word 'NO' on a toilet wall in a Greyhound station. Two days later, Clinton was re-elected. I rest my case. But will *Time* magazine believe me? Of course not, as I can now sit stark naked on their Chief Editor's desk dangling my magnificent manhood in his face without him so much as noticing."

"I know how you feel," said the bearded apparition. "I had a hell of a job trying to convince my fellow Systems Analysts that I was a Son of Odin. 'Look,' I would say. 'I have the Beard and Lack of Personal Hygiene and Everything.' 'Aha,' they would reply, 'That only proves that you are a successful Systems Analyst with a Promising Future Ahead of You.' And of course then Asgardian Protocol demanded that I Wax Wroth and Smite Them Mightily, and it would be back to welfare again on Monday. I always feel it's time to move on from a company when it's a smoking hole in the ground."

Abruptly, nothing happened. Gropius, however, being gifted with powers of perception far beyond those of ordinary immortals, looked round. A figure stood at the door at his back, flanked by two young men in area-ruled black suits with gun-shaped bulges where a red-blooded male's Psion Organizer should have been. The figure shuffled its feet nervously outside in the cold, trying not to appear to look directly at Gropius whilst trying simultaneously to attract his attention. It dragged its huge coat collar up to cover the lower portions of its famous face.

"That'll be my Minion and Puppet," said Gropius, patting the Aesir warmly on the back. "A merry Saturnalia, one and all. Be out in a minute, Bill! Don't go raising any more Federal Reserve Rates till I'm outside, quit giggling insanely, and keep your finger off that button, d'you hear? Remember last time, we had to get God to Recreate the World from Backup and he forgot to restore Atlantis. Next time He might see His way to recreating you with an uncontrollable sex drive and a loyal, long-suffering wife, see if he doesn't."

"Trust me," mumbled God into his beer, "that is something you do not want to have. I have over 10,000 Ursuline nuns married to Me, and every single one of them is long-suffering." He paused for reflection a moment. "It is a good thing," he mused, "that the laws of Christian marriage differ from the Judaistic; otherwise, I would be duty bound to conjugally satisfy each of them once a week." He shuddered. "What a shock *that* would have been for Saint Angela Merici."

The Minor Aesir leaned across the table and whispered to God. "Hey," he said, pulling at God's sleeve. "You. Jehovah great I AM. Explain something to me. We're all Fig-

ments of the Popular Imagination, right?"

God nodded his head sagely.

"Which means there's got to be someone in existence to believe in us, right? So, how come *they* exist, huh? Who believes in all of them out there? The creators of you, their Creator?"

God scratched his beard in puzzlement.

"Well," he said, "I suppose, at some point, *I* must have believed them into being."

The Aesir stared out of the window in fear.

"So – what happens if you ever *stop* believing in them?"

God sat back from his table, angst-stricken.

"Well..." he said.



Dominic Green, another *Interzone* discovery, lives in Northampton. His last three stories here were "That Thing Over There" (IZ 132), which was taken by U.S. editor David Hartwell for reprinting in his best-of-of-the-year anthology, "Dream Blue Murder" (IZ 145) and "Something Chronic" (IZ 159).

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Thog was delighted by his discovery that to best-selling UFOlogists like Nick Pope (now trying his hand at fiction), H. G. Wells is the cutting edge of science: "Think back to *The War of the Worlds*," Van Buren retorted. "Terrestrial microbes would have killed them, because they would have had no resistance. So they've been gradually integrating terrestrial DNA into themselves during the so-called abductions – genetically modifying themselves until they are essentially human." (Nick Pope, *Operation Thunder Child*, 1999)

THE PROTECTING ANCESTORS

Ray Bradbury was awarded an ever so prestigious (non-genre) lifetime achievement medal at the US National Book Awards in November.

Samuel R. Delany, at Readercon 2000, remembered *Analog's* editorial policy in the swinging 1960s: "John Campbell rejected *Nova*. He said his audience could not relate to a black central character."

Virgil Finlay, the legendary sf/fantasy pulp illustrator, may have had feet of clay. Ned Brooks's fanzine *It Goes on the Shelf* features a sample from Tom Cockerroft's pile of persuasive evidence that Finlay copied many details of his drawings from work by the celebrated Australian artist Norman Lindsay, author of *The Magic Pudding*.

Stephen King fulminated in an *Observer* interview about "Kingsley Amis types" persecuting genre authors like King and J. K. Rowling with cruel accusations of "not literature." Even those ignorant of Amis's unashamed publication of sf, supernatural, spy and crime novels (and enthusiastic essays on these despised genres) might suspect that he said rather little about Rowling, having died two years before her first novel appeared.

J. K. Rowling doesn't approve of critical essay collections like the SF Foundation's recent *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* – or so said her agent Christopher Little as he forbade anyone to quote from the sacred texts (at least their British editions) in the proposed *Harry Potter and the Ivory Tower*. Coincidentally, an unconfirmed rumour from the *Publisher's Lunch* e-newsletter claims that Rowling was thinking about changing agents, having supposedly discovered that Little's commission and extra charges were far above the going rate.

Alison Spedding, the British fantasy author imprisoned in Bolivia for drugs possession since mid-1998, has been released on £1,300 bail to await the supreme court's final decision on her case.

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Ian Watson was invited to open Nottingham University's forum on "Artists and the Built Environment" with a reading: "What story could be more suitable than my 'Talk of the Town,' in which a Midlands town reveals to my hero its private language, understood by nobody else? 'Hoodabonda? Shoochoo moochabal' et cetera. East Midlands Arts neglected to tell me that, laudably just in case any of the audience needed this, everything would be simultaneously translated into Sign..."

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers and Sinners. *SF World* magazine folded after its fourth issue, dated September 2000. Editor Steve Holland lamented "a lousy level of advertising revenue which could not support the magazine." The publishers had impetuously pulled the plug before sales figures for the reduced-price issue 3 were available. Meanwhile, newspapers ran exaggerated death reports for Gollancz, like the *Independent's* "The venerable Victor Gollancz list is in effect no more. The logo that once graced books by J. B. Priestley and Michael Foot will now appear only on science fiction titles." That is, the relatively few non-sf/fantasy titles from VG are being moved to other Orion imprints. "We will stop using the Millennium name on paperbacks," adds editorial supremo Malcolm Edwards, "though the logo will remain (with the 'M' changing to 'G')." Ah, Gillennuig.

As Others See Us. *Geoffrey Wheatcroft* on the late Kingsley Amis: "He became a science-fiction fan, rarely a good sign..." (*The Atlantic Monthly*, September 2000)

R.I.P. Eddie Powell, the stunt-man who appeared in countless UK-made sf and horror movies from 1949 to 1996, died in August. Though usually

uncredited, he regularly doubled for Christopher Lee in Hammer and other films, and played the title role in *Alien*. **Nancy Tucker Shaw** (1928-2000), US fan of many years' standing and Bob Shaw's widow, died on 17 September. **Curt Siodmak** (1902-2000), German-born author (*Donovan's Brain*), screenwriter (*F.P.1 Antwortet Nicht*, *The Wolf Man*) and director, died on 2 September. His invented werewolf doggerel has passed into folklore: "Even a man who is pure in heart, And says his prayers each night, May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms, And the moon is high and bright." **Don Wilcox** (1905-2000), 1940s US pulp author whose real name was Cleo Eldon Knox, died in March aged 94.

Letter Column. Correspondent **Mike Cule** asks: "On p239 of *Darwin's Radio* Greg Bear describes a woman as having a 'thickly flossed pubis.' Am I the only one this makes think of *vagina dentata*?" **Diane Duane** sent excited e-mail urging me to spread the word about the UK reissue of (two of) J. P. Martin's classic "Uncle" children's books, long out of print. And **Michael Moorcock** reveals his secret fear: "Expecting Thog to spot my worst literary moments is what keeps my standards up, Dave. I live in constant terror."

More Awards. *Sidewise Awards* for alternate history... Long: *Resurrection Day*, Brendan DuBois – the only shortlisted item. Short: "The Eighth Register," Alain Bergeron (*Northern Suns*; *Tesseract's*). Special: Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy series. *British Fantasy Awards*... Karl Edward Wagner (life achievement): Anne McCaffrey. Novel (August Derleth award): *Indigo*, Graham Joyce. Short: "White," Tim Lebbon. Anthology: *Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 10 ed*. Stephen Jones. Collection: *Lonesome Roads*, Peter Crowther. Artist: Les Edwards. Small Press: Razorblade Press. *Prometheus Award* for libertarian sf, whatever that is exactly: *A Deepness in the Sky*, Vernor Vinge.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Communications*: "They went back to the pilot's room where Solly blinked the running lights. / Please inform us if you can hear this transmission," came the reply. "One blink for yes. Two for no." (Jack McDevitt, *Infinity Beach*, 2000) "The housekeeper found her way into the bedroom and lay down in a pathetic crumble." (James Patterson, *Virgin*, 1980) "And he burst himself with chortles." (Sheri S. Tepper, *The Family Tree*, 1998) *Dept of Thog Bites Hand of Creator*: "He glanced behind him, careful to move only his eyes, not his head..." (John Grant, *The World*, 1992 – discovered and submitted by the embarrassed author while revising the text for a reissue).



Sh, it's starting. This was all a long time ago, so don't be scared. See that? that's this film when it was just a little baby screenplay. That's its daddy nuzzling it; he's called Walon, but I don't think he's going to be in this for long. Look! that big scary monster bursting out of the trees is called Paul Verhoeven – see how the very earth shivers beneath his step. No, don't worry, he's not going to get it; see, he's going after *Total Recall* instead, and Walon's little baby is going to be an animated feature – oh no! here come *Land Before Time* and *We're Back*, and the baby's got nowhere to go... Now another writer's got it, and another, and whoops, they've dropped it, no, someone else has picked it up, and all the time the scenery's getting more and more amazing – oh, but look, it's fallen into the CG jungle, where it'll be safe and someone will look after it. See, they've got big cute eyes, and they're talking the way they do in Disney films. OK, you'd better cover your ears now. Oh, don't be frightened, sweetheart, at least they're not going to sing.

Dinosaur tries frantically to restore a decorous mediocrity after an opening showreel which is, without any serious rival, the single most awe-striking sequence in animation history: a brilliantly storyboarded (and scored) tower-ride of narrative cliffplunges and precision-timed vistas of vertigo that leaves you nursing a gob that's been smacked in 59 places. For a moment, it looks like they're going to succeed in bringing the whole thing down. When those wretched lemurs start talking their awful, awful anthropomorphic dialogue, it's like a sock in the head with a bolide, a near-fatal collision of chondrule-headed studio imperatives

with lush, living cinema. And asteroid strike is a neat, if drastic, solution to the budgetary problem of rendering the gorgeous, teeming Upper Cretaceous for 70 further minutes: at a stroke, it simplifies the lush ferny backgrounds down to barren desert and rock under grey cloud, and takes out most of the global population of animables.

But all to no avail. Nothing can disguise the fact that this first photoreal animated feature is a pivotal moment in cinema evolution, marked by a Cambrian explosion of new and cryptic credit jobs such as "Look Developers," "Manager, Disk Space and Retakes," and the baffling "Spikes Up Plate Units." No effort has been spared in the attempt to turn *Dinosaur* into a major disappointment, but they just can't hack it. Certainly nobody could arraign its final screenplay – whose tortuous evolutionary history is reflected in some of the most complex writing credits in any modern blockbuster – on charges of ground-breaking; but even that, like everything else, works in its favour. A complete introduction to contemporary film form for eight-year-olds, it reads like an attempt to reconstruct the ancestor of all modern film plots, a pure and perfect meld of Syd Field and Joseph Campbell in which you can check off all the I-Spys: the Moments of Recommitment, the Cast of Archetypes, the numbered steps in the Hero's Journey. During its twelve-year drift through trackless development space, its *Water-ship Down*-with-iguanadons plot seems to have picked up bits and pieces of everything else ever made, especially by Disney – with grafts from *The Incredible Journey*, *The Lion King*, *Tarzan*, and even the studio renegade *Prince of Egypt*, though the project's

been knocking around mouseland so long that in some cases the influence may go in the other direction.

The toughest challenge has been spinning global extinction for feelgood, which inevitably requires some compromise with reality. Even the space impact is rather tame for an extinction-level event: no tsunamis, no global winter, and the scenery improves no end once the exiled children get to the promised land (which itself looks awfully like an old impact crater, though that seems too highly-evolved a concept for *Dinosaur*'s squash-ball brain). But *Dinosaur* does make a surprisingly bold stab at reconciling Disneyism with Darwin, universal siblinghood with survival of the fittest, by stressing the survival value of cooperation over competition, Aladar's soft Darwinism over Cron's hardline version. It doesn't, of course, address the residual truth that Aladar's successful completion of the Circle of Life™ is a merely temporary victory, and that what we have witnessed at the boundary layer between Acts is the doom of all his kind. But the awkward voiceovers at beginning and end are clearly a well-meant attempt to engage with the questions young ones will be bound to ask. If dinosaurs were so cool how come there aren't any? Doesn't that mean we're all going to go extinct and the earth pass into the inheritance of beetles? The answer offered may be strictly little-book platitudes ("None of us really know what changes, big or small, lie ahead... We can only hope that in some small way our time here will be remembered"), but it's remarkably advanced for Disney, and a huge evolutionary step on from "You can be anything you want to be" (No you jolly

well can't) or "Just say 'I love you, Dad'" (MUM! I need to throw up in your corn bucket).

Down another branch of the timeline, *Dinosaur's* original slated director has done a slightly more successful job of turning a can't-fail concept (updating *The Invisible Man* for CG) into a colossal disappointment. Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* starts well, loading up with all the director's trademarks: hospital-lit setups; provocative brutality, especially towards its male lead, cleverly belated by specious moral pretexts; cynicism about the process of science and the strings tying technology to the service of the military-industrial complex. But it all goes horribly wrong for our troubled-genius hero once he downs the potion that turns his dreams into action, only to unleash his demons and trigger a massive and irreversible regression to really dumb movie plotting that brings down the whole project in flames.

As ever, it's brilliantly directed, and the images of ape and man stripped live to their Vesalian underwear are undeniably among the most powerful sequences in modern visual sf. But the thing most fatally missing from *Hollow Man* is any touch of the mordant humour and distancing irony that usually allow Verhoeven to get away with plots this stupid and characters this dimensionless. It's particularly unfortunate that Andrew Marlowe's screenplay seems progressively to dissolve its covering layers till all that's left is a raw abstraction of action-film plotting. Amazingly, given Verhoeven's evident responsiveness to the themes of the original novel, *Hollow Man* turns its back on its Wellsian roots by allowing its hero only two fleeting, strictly-personal excursions into actual human society, choosing instead to spend most of its time (and all of its final act) in the hermetically-enclosed plot environment of a sealed underground lab, where it regresses to a primitive Walter Hill Ur-plot of half-a-dozen expendable characters getting picked off by the unseen killer as they try to plot his movements on an animated map of the set, and climaxes in a new world's worst in elevator-shaft finales involving ticking countdowns and still-not-dead bad guys grabbing your ankle as you shin up the ladder to outclimb a shockwave that wafts gently up with all the urgency of rising dough.

It beggars imagining why someone like Verhoeven, who can make exploitation cinema look more intelligent and moral than anyone else alive, should be so willing to jettison everything that makes all the *Invisible Man* movies worth trying to cap in

the first place. *Hollow Man's* one substantial new contribution here is the rather heavy-handed insistence that hot science is something men do with their knobs, a competitive display by testosterone-sozzled dickheads with an ego instead of a life. But this very theme – and indeed the same character and plot in a cuddlier Disney packaging – actually gets a more complex and (crawsticking though it is to say) thoughtful treatment in the ungainly form of *Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*. Like its predecessor, *The Klumps* is only too conscious of its responsibilities as a flagbearer for black cinema in the Hollywood heartland, bringing African-American issues into the mainstream of gross-out spectacle comedy for all the family. Once again, it uses a sentimental Disney comedy to grapple with the huge burden of social aspiration and anxiety carried by achieving middle-class blacks: the fear of dumbness and failure, of making a damn fool of yourself at a swanky dinner-party or on live national TV, and of the horrible social disparity between your classy fiancée's terrifyingly uptown parents and your own embarrassing extended family of lard-assed foulmouths, halfwits and losers. But whereas in the first movie Sherman's problem was a cycle of low self-esteem, binge eating, and obesity, here he's come to terms with himself and his size, but suffers instead from a new compulsive disorder, a kind of African-American Tourette's, as a leering, jive-cracking Eddie Murphy character keeps jumping out of his mouth at moments of high social stakes, like proposing to Janet Jackson.

But the key to Sherman's achievement as a scientist is the bit of him deep inside that thinks with his plonker. As his therapist explains, "We all have a little Buddy Love inside us... You will never control him until you learn that he is a part of you." Foolishly ignoring the big red

arrows pointing to this plot advice, Sherman purges Buddy from his DNA, only to find that the appalling Eddie Murphy character was what made him smart in the first place. Without the infantile competitive male aggression that drives him to excel, he reverts to every successful black American's deepest nightmare, a dumb fat guy with no job, no prospects, no relationship, and a family of ethnic caricatures.

As in the original remake, this is clearly on one level about the star's ambivalent relationship with his own creation. Murphy does an impressive job of projecting all his loathing for his 1980s screen persona into the vile Buddy, who this time around sheds all traces of the 1963 character's wicked appeal. The roly-poly Klumps are a more mixed bag, handicapped by an inherited partial paralysis of the jaw that makes them look and talk as if they've got their mouths full of wadding and their chins cased in latex.

There are nicely-observed moments of dialogue and mannerism in all performances, alongside a fair amount of pretty tiresome star self-indulgence; the Klump movies may be a minor milestone for black Hollywood, but the fact remains that Murphy's amateur party impressions have kept seven good black character actors out of the role of a lifetime. Nevertheless, its slapstick reworking of *Flowers for Algernon* (who finally gets his revenge in the big gross-out scene) engages with some surprisingly tough issues of compulsive behaviour and living with dementia, even if their handling is necessarily rather doltish. The plotting, and especially its scientific underpinnings, keep step with its hero in its accelerated regression to infancy, culminating in a genuinely touching moment where he stops being able to recognize his beloved and she promises tearfully to be his carer – only for the miracle of her

Previous page: Kevin Bacon fades away in Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man*.

Below: Space Cowboys James Garner, Tommy Lee Jones, Clint Eastwood and Donald Sutherland



tears to reanimate the desiccated Buddy, and a joyously daft resolution encapsulated in the single magnificent line: "His DNA dispersed in the water molecules! Here – drink this!" Two lines later, he's back doing square roots of seven-digit numbers in his head to two decimal places. Aww. It may not be able to clean up after itself, but who couldn't love something this cuddly and moronic? As JJ's self-penned end-title song rather catchily pledges, "Doesn't matter if the mind is gone too/Just as long as I'm with you."

But of course the season's major essay on the role of testosterone in human endeavour is Clint Eastwood's *Space Cowboys*, in which a hand-picked team of pensionable stars finally get to go into a space movie. For astronauts, we are reminded, are nothing more than test pilots, who are themselves no different from cowboy actors: vain, boyish, competitive, "not team players." If you can round up steers in black and white, you can surely corral a rogue Soviet satellite. As an experiment in third-age cinema, Clint's vehicle certainly targets the controls with astronomical precision. Unthreateningly paced, as if for an audience with plenty of time on their hands, it avoids any extended exposure to the speedier aspects of third-millennium life, with a notable

absence of cybercultural funkiness, and no appealing male characters under 50.

The most striking thing about all this is the way space fiction has become the legitimate province of nostalgia. As the title tellingly acknowledges, the space age is becoming as remote as the wild west, its doddering survivors the final living memories of a time when sf's deepest dreams came briefly true. *Space Cowboys* is a powerful elegy for a lost era of cold-war innocence, a poignant fantasy of return to the brief moment of history when NASA was comfortably funded, real heroes were spacemen, and the moon was accessible to human boots. Its starting-point is the recognition that the generation that went into space is dying off, and with it the memory of real space travel. Nobody is fooled for a moment into thinking that shuttle missions and space stations count as proper space travel, which is why *Space Cowboys* evokes specific nostalgia for the age of lunar landings, and the only plot riddle is how on earth it's going to find a way to put one of its characters on the moon when the whole setup is centred around nothing more outbound than a decaying satellite full of Cold War secrets targeted on major US cities.

Like other NASA-cooperant films, *Space Cowboys* gives a telling glimpse

into how the Agency wants to sell its product in an age of permanent budgetary indifference. The current slew of films about Mars missions comes from a desperate push within NASA to reignite public interest in the one kind of space work that reliably attracts enthusiasm if not funding: real interplanetary journeys where you actually land on things and (invariably) find sentient life. *Space Cowboys* stops short of joining the conspiracy to suppress the near-certainty that Mars, and probably the rest of the galaxy, is stark, stone-cold lifeless. But in other respects it's revealingly shameless, and shamelessly revealing. Like most movie people's movies, it's a movie people's movie, its plot built around the process of casting and actor-managing a big production under the combined pressure of star egos, in-house manoeuvrings, jockeying among producers, backstabbing, betrayals, and leaks from the set. Sure, there are screw-ups; yet they're not systemic, but merely down to individual rotten apples. Inadvertently, it gives the all too valid impression that NASA is all too like a movie studio hustling for production capital, desperate to reassure us that sooner or later it'll find a monolith, or at least save the world from asteroid apocalypse. After all, it worked for the dinosaurs.

Nick Lowe

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SINGLE-MINDED SINGLE-MINDED SINGLE-MINDED single-minded

Tony Ballantyne

There was no ground, only a moving mass of silver-grey machines, each the size and shape of a heavy fountain pen on legs. There was a constant busy flicker of silver as the machines crawled over and under each other, causing gentle troughs and waves in the heaving collection of bodies. Every so often a machine would fling itself towards the spaceship that hovered just above the planet's surface and Sean, standing in its open hatchway looking out over the mechanical sea, would smile. Six Earth months ago this planet had been nothing more than a lump of rock orbiting an unexceptional star. Sean had popped into existence just long enough to drop one cigar shaped self-replicating machine onto its surface before escaping back into the safe anonymity of hyperspace. Now he had returned, his experiment was a success and it seemed that no one could suspect him of any wrongdoing. When he heard the voice behind him he nearly fell out of the hatchway, such was his surprise.

"Sean Simons. I have been recording this journey and now have sufficient evidence that you have made unauthorized use of a Von Neumann Machine of your own modification."

Sean spun around to see a short, stocky, grey-haired man standing in the middle of the living room of his spaceship. The man rubbed the end of his nose and gave a sad smile.

"You will be reported to the Environment Agency."

Sean felt the cold sickness of fear settling in his stomach. He looked around the tiny space of his living room, dazed and confused.

"I don't understand. How did you get on board? You can't have stowed away, the ship is too small."

The man smiled. "I came through the secret passage."

He pointed to a hatchway that had opened up in the far wall, just above the kitchen unit where the spice cupboard had been. Sean glanced towards the hatch and

then scowled at the intruder.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said with irritation. "How could a ship the size of this one have a secret passage? There's space for a living room, a bedroom, an exercise room and a motor, and that's it. What are you, computer-generated projection? Externally forced hallucination?"

The intruder gave a gentle smile. "Neither. I attached my ship to yours before you even left Earth. I linked our computers, gave you limited control over my considerably more powerful motors and allowed you to fly us both here. The Agency had suspected you of antisocial behaviour for some time."

Sean felt his habitual certainty ebbing away, damped by the solid fear swelling in his stomach. He moved stiffly to where he had left his pocket console lying on the coffee table and activated the ship's senses. After a moment's pause he spoke.

"I don't believe you." He pointed to the view screen. "Look. There's no other ship out there. Who are you? What do you want?"

The stranger pulled his own console from his pocket and tapped a couple of buttons. The outside hatch slid shut and the clicking of the VNMs was replaced by a gentle welling of music in the background. The stranger slid into the white leather sofa.

"Come on, Sean. Don't be a fool. We've had the technology to make ships virtually invisible ever since the Stealth Wars. Not that that was needed here, of course. My computer controls yours, remember? I determine what your ship's senses see."

The stranger ran his finger along a seam in the white leather, tracing its path around the edge of a cushion.

"As to who I am, my name is Robert Johnston and I work for the Environment Agency. Tell me, Sean. What was this planet like before you destroyed it?"

Sean bit his lip and leant back against the smooth

cream plastic of the hatch. There was a faint tremor in his voice as he spoke.

"It was just dead rock. I wouldn't have released the Von Neumann Machine if I thought there was anything important here."

Robert Johnston's finger paused over a seam. He raised one eyebrow and looked at Sean with mild surprise.

"Just dead rock? Really? Of course, you performed complete surface and deep-planet scans before you released the machine? You have the full records in your ship's memory?"

Sean lowered his eyes to the varnished wooden floor. "No," he said softly.

Robert Johnston suddenly jumped to his feet. His face was flushed with anger. "Of course you haven't," he shouted. "You bloody kids never do. I bet you never even scanned for mono-cellular life. There could have been organisms living by hot vents in caves deep below the surface. Did you think to scan for those?"

Sean stared at the floor, silent. His face burned a deep guilty red.

Robert stamped across the floor and pushed his face close to Sean's.

"No. I didn't think you would have. So we'll never know if your childish, unimaginative, second-rate self-replicating machine destroyed something valuable when it ate up this planet."

Sean gazed straight into Robert's eyes and spoke in a low voice. "There was nothing second-rate about my VNM."

Robert Johnston gave a sudden laugh. "You have a very high opinion of yourself, young man. I wonder if that will change when you have spent 15 years out in the cometary belt, living in a restricted-technology bubble."

Sean's anger evaporated. To his horror and disgust, he felt a shudder inside himself. He felt as if he was going to cry. Robert was staring at him, reading the emotions as they marched across his face and Sean hated it. Just as the first tears appeared at the corner of his eyes, Robert gave a little smile and spoke in a gentle voice.

"Of course, there is always an alternative."

Robert had opened an image on the view screen. A 3-D political map of a starfield. A territory in the shape of a roughly spherical blob was picked out in silver. A scale at one edge showed the blob to be about 20 light years in diameter.

"Twenty light years, I don't believe it —" whispered Sean.

"All the result of one set of six self-replicating machines." Robert was behind Sean, leaning over, resting his elbows on the back of Sean's chair. "One of the machines had a set of ayletts onboard: building blocks for an artificial intelligence system."

"I know what ayletts are," snapped Sean. "My father's company helped design them."

"Of course it did. Foolish of me to forget," apologized Robert. "Still, it makes your converted planet look rather pathetic really, doesn't it?"

Sean felt a stab of anger. Robert was going out of his way to diminish his achievement. He forced himself to remain calm. Instead, the fear in him took the opportunity to overwhelm his jealousy. He looked back at the screen.

"But... 20 light years. It dwarfs Earth's exploitation sphere. I hope it's friendly."

Robert Johnston gave a little laugh. "I don't think so. We've picked up a lot of activity using passive detection systems. Whatever's in there is massing an awful lot of hardware. You see, it's always the same when these systems go out of control. You have self-replicating machines reproducing unchecked and an AI that is growing up at the same time as them. The AI thinks it's omnipotent. All children do when they are born. It's the limitations and disappointments that are imposed upon us that force us to grow up. The AI isn't experiencing those limitations. Do you understand, Sean?"

Sean had the impression that Robert wasn't just talking about the AI. He chose to ignore the comment and continued to stare at the screen. Silence filled the liferoom.

"Nice ship you've got here," said Robert, looking at the walnut trim around the view screen. He squeezed the soft white leather of the chair between his fingers. "Daddy buy it for you?"

Sean ignored the remark. "How did it get so big?" he asked, "Surely the Environment Agency should have put a stop to it?"

Robert gave an embarrassed cough. "It's a long way from Earth. By the time we noticed it, it was too late to do anything about it. That system is bigger than we are. If it discovers our existence, and the likelihood is that it already has, it will treat us as a threat and try to destroy us."

"But that's silly. Why should it do that?"

"It is in the nature of those who have never been told *no* to think that the universe is there for their own benefit. As I said, it's acting like a spoilt child."

Robert held out his hand. One of Sean's cigar-shaped self replicating machine sat in the palm, its silver forelegs waving back and forth slowly.

"Why doesn't it feed upon the ship?" asked Robert, pointing to the silver machine.

Sean gave a little smile. He loved to talk about his work. "That's a basic problem in VNM design. How do you stop them tearing each other apart in their quest to make copies of themselves? I use a public key system. Each VNM constantly transmits a different prime number. If they meet another copy of themselves they compare the prime number with the private key they hold inside themselves. The private key they all inherit from the original VNM. If the transmitted prime is valid, they leave each other alone. Otherwise —"

Robert nodded. "And, of course, your ship transmits a valid code. Very clever." He reached into a pocket and handed Sean a silver shape. Sean gasped as he took it. The edges were so sharp they had cut his hand. Bright red blood sat in tiny droplets on the reflective surface of the object. It looked like a Swiss army knife that had been opened out and then stripped down so that only the sharp edges remained. Sean shivered as he examined it. There was something lean and fast and evil about the object.

"What is it?" he said in hushed tones.

"It's what you will use to destroy the enemy," replied Robert Johnston.

Sean's spaceship hovered above the boiling grey surface of the converted planet. A small box hanging between a thick white clouded sky and the busy movement of his Von Neumann Machines. A tearing noise rent the air, and a few of Sean's machines turned towards the sound, waving their silver forelegs questioningly. They could sense food somewhere nearby. If they had had eyes, they would have seen a second spaceship shimmer into existence. Much larger than the first ship, it seemed to surround it like an eagle bent to feed on a mouse, grasping it in its claws whilst tearing with its beak. The machines had ears, however. Their forelegs stilled and they turned from the former food source as the sound of the new signal reached them.

On board the ship, Robert Johnston was dabbing at Sean's hand with a white linen napkin.

"Why can't I go in the Autodoc?" asked Sean plaintively.

"You can when we get under way. I don't want to waste any more time until then. That system is expanding at a frightening rate."

Sean gave a bitter laugh. "That's your problem. I'd rather take my chances in the cometary belt. I am not about to do battle with an AI that has the resources of 33,000 cubic light years of space at its disposal."

Robert continued to dab at Sean's hand. The white cotton was rapidly turning a dark red. The silver machine lay on the nearby coffee table, tiny hemispheres of red blood still on its surface.

"Ah. There's a problem with that," said Robert distractedly. "Now that I've revealed the secrets of the VNM civilization to you, you owe the EA a substantial sum of money. Information costs, Sean. You can either pay us for that information by accepting this job, or you can add 15 years to your sentence."

Sean gave a strangled cry. "I never agreed to listen to that information. I never realized its worth!"

"Yes you did. I have a six-dimensional recording of the event. I offered you an alternative to 15 years imprisonment, and you accepted it."

"That's ridiculous. My father will not allow it. Don't you realize he won't allow any harm to come to me?"

"So he claims. If he'd brought you up properly you wouldn't be in this situation in the first place."

Sean glared at him, too angry to speak. A single drop of blood fell onto the polished wooden floor.

Robert tilted his head to one side, silver strands of hair reflecting the light. "I am assuming your silence indicates compliance?"

Sean said nothing.

"Very well. Computer? Jump."

Robert Johnston dropped out of hyperspace at the very edge of the enemy system.

Sean stood in the viewing section of Robert's spaceship, shivering with apprehension. He had never been so close to a vacuum. A glowing black void, lit by the icy light of thousands of stars lay just a few centimetres from him, held back by nothing more than a thin layer of polarized adamantium. Sean had expected to see rank upon rank of silver battleships, all poised ready to spring into hyperspace and from there fall upon Earth in a rain of fire.

Instead, there was nothing. Only the faintest suggestion of movement against the background of stars.

"Do you see anything there to frighten you?" asked Robert. He stood behind Sean, peeling an orange. The smell of the fruit filled the tiny room.

"No. Should I?" said Sean.

Robert passed him a segment of orange and then did something to the view. An object appeared to be approaching the ship, something unimaginably long but with no width. Sean could only detect its presence when its path wriggled across the stars.

"What is it?" whispered Sean. Juice from the orange ran into the cut on his hand and stung.

"Watch."

Robert continued to increase the magnification. Sean strained to see. There was something there, but it was too thin to see.

"Is it a length of chain?" asked Sean, puzzled.

"Sort of," said Robert. "The enemy AI would have arranged for a self-replicating machine to be dropped on a planet, just like you did. There's no need to imagine what the planet would be like when it was totally converted, we've seen it. A shifting mass of identical machines, pulled together by their own gravity to form a sphere in space."

Sean ate the orange segment. He had a vision of a grapefruit spinning on its axis. Peel back the skin and find a writhing mass of ants inside.

Robert's voice was hushed with reverence. "Now, when the planet is totally converted, a signal is sent. The machines at the equator begin to walk to the poles. They climb on top of each other and fuse together. More creatures from the middle walk to the axis. The planet gets thinner and longer. Keep it up for long enough and this is what you end up with."

Sean's mouth dropped open. A piece of orange fell to the floor. He regained control of himself.

"But... why?"

Robert's reflection shrugged in the adamantium screen. "We think the AI is weaving a web around its territory. It doesn't want to be approached through normal space."

Sean sat down on the floor. The concept was too big to take in standing. He began to shake his head. "What are we doing here? We can't fight that AI. It must be the most intelligent thing in the universe by now."

Robert looked down at him in genuine surprise. "Why do you say that?"

Sean held out his hands, palm upwards. The glow of the stars made them faintly luminescent. "Oh, come on. The original AI must have been constantly redesigning itself since it was first established. With near infinite space to expand, its intelligence must have increased at an exponential rate."

Sean thought of his father's estate back on Earth. Long green lawns ran from his yellow stone house for a kilometre in all directions to lap at the edge of the grey city blocks that surrounded them. Four square kilometres of what was possibly the most expensive real estate in the world, and it was left ostentatiously empty in a subtle display of superiority. There was hardly a person on Earth who didn't know that the Simons family AI, the

architect of all their wealth, was located beneath those smooth green lawns.

Robert Johnston was looking genuinely bemused. "But it's impossible for an intelligent entity to design something more intelligent than itself, he said. "I thought everyone knew that. It's a basic law of the universe. You don't get something for nothing. Don't you know the first rule of meta-intelligences?"

Sean gave a laugh. "Come on. What about my family's AI? It's more intelligent than a human. For goodness sake, it takes AIs to design hyperdrives and VNMs. Have you ever seen the explanation of the basic mechanism of a VNM? It starts: *Visualize the cross-section of an eight-dimensional sphere projected onto a six-dimensional plane* –" Sean shook his head in disbelief. "No human could have thought of that."

"You built a VNM," said Robert with a pretended look of surprise. "Surely you're not saying that you didn't understand what you were doing?"

Sean ignored this attempt to provoke him. His voice was level. "I modified the basic VNM mechanism, as supplied by the AI. Just like everyone else does."

There was a moment's silence. Sean looked out into the brilliant black of space and caught the movement of the weaving strand that would form the AI's web. What sort of intelligence could imagine such a thing?

Robert saw his expression and guessed his thoughts. He spoke. "The AI we are fighting came from a survival kit. It will be intelligent enough to build an autodoc, construct a functioning ship with a hyperdrive and to terraform a planet. That's about it."

Sean wondered if Robert was being sarcastic. He was disturbed to see that, judging by his expression, Robert was not. Sean rubbed his hand gently and began to speak.

"For such an intellectual lightweight, that AI is certainly doing an excellent job of taking over the galaxy. It makes one question the wisdom of placing such powerful aylets in a survival kit. I'm surprised this doesn't happen all the time."

"We have always taken precautions to stop this happening," replied Robert. "We insist that a second set of aylets is placed in any survival kit. Any survival system that is activated should grow up with two intelligences controlling it. It stops the spoilt only-child syndrome."

Robert paused to give Sean a charming smile. "But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Robert jumped the joined ships clear of the AI's sphere of influence. He served up hot pasta to Sean as they watched an enhanced visual of the infected region from interstellar space, 200 light years away. The enemy's region was picked out in a bloodthirsty red.

"I still don't see why we had to come back to my ship to eat," said Sean through a mouthful of spaghetti bolognese. "You've got a better kitchen than I have," replied Robert. "I feel too nervous to eat."

"Ignore that. This may be your last meal for some time. You should enjoy it. There's steak and baked potatoes to follow. What do you want for dessert?"

Sean ignored the question. He forced himself to chew

and swallow. Orange grease stained his chin. Robert turned to face the screen, leaning back against the table as he did so.

Sean spoke up. "I notice you're not eating," he said.

"My mission is different to yours. I don't need feeding up."

Sean felt like smacking Robert across his calm complacent face. He took another mouthful of spaghetti and forced himself to chew slowly. Robert frightened him. His eyes fell on the sharp silver machine Robert had given him. Droplets of his blood still shone brightly on its surface, as wet as if they'd just fallen there. The machine made him shiver. It had a look of pure, unfettered evil. Sean finally asked the question he had been diligently avoiding.

"So. If, and I mean if, I agree to fight for you, what am I supposed to do? How are we supposed to fight an alien system eight times bigger than Earth's?"

Robert turned from the screen and gave a gentle smile. "Have you ever heard the story of the man who did a job for Pharaoh? When told to name his reward he asked that Pharaoh place one grain of rice on the first square of a chess board, two grains on the second, four on the third and so on until the board was full. Pharaoh agreed. He didn't realize that he was giving away more rice than existed on earth."

Sean frowned. "Did they have chessboards back then?" he asked through a mouthful of spaghetti.

"Don't be so picky. I'm trying to demonstrate the power of self-replicating machines. If the number of machines you have doubles every ten minutes, they quickly overrun the landscape. Look at that planet you destroyed."

Sean dropped his fork on his plate and pushed it away. Arguing was giving him an appetite. "Where's my steak?" he said.

"In a minute. Now, the silver machine was designed by the Environmental Agency's AI. The most intelligent AI we know. Every point six seconds the machine will reproduce by making six copies of itself. It will overrun a planet a lot faster than your machines did. An awful lot faster."

Sean tilted his head to one side. He was trying to work it out. Robert waved his hands in the air. He was getting excited.

"Not only that, it contains no primary keys or any other instructions preventing it from eating its own kind. It will use any previously replicated material to make copies of itself, including copies of itself. You can't beam codes at the replicating machines to neutralize them. They will look for anything mechanical, drop it into hyperspace and pop it back out as another fighting machine. It's a wonderful idea. It destroys hostile materiel and leaves organic life alone."

Robert looked down at the silver machine with a warm glow of affection. Sean felt he was losing his appetite again. He topped up his glass with alcohol-free white wine. It glowed red in the light from the view screen.

"But that's no solution. It will just keep replicating until it takes over the universe. You've just replaced one problem with another."

Robert shook his head excitedly. "No! It's built in, you see. A recursive function. Every time it reproduces it subtracts one from a number stored inside itself and passes that value to its children. When their internal number

gets to one, the silver machines will jump into hyperspace and stay there."

"How big is the initial number?" asked Sean in hushed tones.

"Seventy-seven," said Robert happily. "It should be enough."

Sean drank his wine down in one and then refilled the glass to the top. White wine spilled down the sides of the glass and soaked the tablecloth. He took another sip and spoke. There was a tremor in his voice.

"It sounds very clever. But I don't understand. What am I doing here?"

Robert looked rather guilty. "Ah. That's the tricky bit. We need someone to press the button to activate the machine. It has to be done close to the AI so it doesn't have time to prepare counter-measures. The trouble is, once the button is pressed, the machines will eat everything. That includes minor items such as your spaceship. You may be trapped on the AI's planet for some time until the silver machines stop reproducing and we can send in a recovery vessel."

Robert smiled brightly. "Are you ready for your steak now?"

Sean felt angry and impotent. "You mean you brought me all this way just to press a button? That's ridiculous. Why can't you do that?"

Robert looked smug. "I'd like to, but I can't. The silver machine will eat anything previously replicated. That goes for me. I'm an android. Hadn't you guessed? You don't think the Environmental Agency would risk another human life out here, do you?"

Sean glared at Robert, too angry to speak. Robert didn't appear to notice this as he spoke into the deepening silence. "Anyway, I had my memory completely backed up before I accepted this mission. Just in case."

Robert's spaceship didn't contain a kitchen, of course. He didn't need one. Sean barely noted the fact as they crawled back through the secret passage to Robert's view deck. He stood and watched as their two ships separated from each other, the smell of fruit filling the air. Robert was standing behind him peeling another orange. The juice was dripping from his fingers and splashing on the blackness of the transparent floor.

"Will you stop doing that?" said Sean angrily. "Why do you do it, anyway? It's not as though you can eat oranges. You're an android."

Robert gave placid smile. "Aromatherapy. The smell of oranges is supposed to be invigorating."

Sean ignored him. He watched his box-like ship drifting nearby. It began to twist out of shape, its walls bending and buckling as it unfolded in five dimensions.

"Why have you triggered the self-replicating mechanism on my ship?" he asked.

Robert dropped a long strip of peel onto the floor and began to tear the orange into segments. He gave a smile. "Ah. Well, you'll need something to travel back to Earth in, won't you? I imagine that when you release the silver machine, your spaceship will be the first thing to be eaten."

He squeezed a segment in his hand so that juice

squirted in all directions as he spoke.

The new spaceship was a perfect replica of the first, right down to the half-eaten bowl of pasta on the table of the living room. Robert sat Sean down on the white leather sofa and handed him the silver machine wrapped in a thick linen napkin. He folded Sean's fingers over the button and then fiddled with the ship's console. The lights dimmed and soothing music filled the room. Sean felt as if he wanted to be sick. Robert was pacing up and down, waiting for something.

"I thought we were in a hurry," said Sean, trying to be angry.

"We are," said Robert. "We just need to wait for the right moment. Now remember, as soon as you break out of hyperspace, press the button. It won't take the AI long to evaluate the threat and take countermeasures. It's paranoid, remember. It's expecting something."

"I know," said Sean. "Press the button. I know." His stomach tightened.

Robert appeared to hear something. He gave a sigh and relaxed. "There we are. It's time. As soon as I get back to my ship, I'll send you on your way. Good luck."

Sean gave a brave smile. Robert turned and climbed into the secret passage. The spice cupboard swung shut over the entrance and Sean was left alone in the calm of the living room, one hand gripping the white leather of the sofa, the other curled around the linen-wrapped VNM. The screen showed the external view, a bright starfield. The tension was building inside Sean to unbearable levels. He shifted on the sofa. The view flickered and blue sky filled the screen. Sean pressed the button. His hand clenched an empty linen napkin. There was a series of popping sounds and bright sunlight lanced down upon him. The ship was being eaten up, bite after invisible bite. The floor vanished; Sean fell forward and landed on loose grey stone, scraping his hands and knees. Cool air settled on his skin and he realized he was naked.

He stood up and looked around. He was standing in the middle of a city that was dissolving as he watched. Silver towers and high arching walkways were being eaten away by a silver swarm of self-replicating machines. Sean sat down on the loose grey gravel, too awestruck to notice how uncomfortable it was, and watched as the city vanished leaving nothing but grey gravel plains set with empty sockets where towers had once fitted. After the city had vanished, he continued to watch the empty gravel plains. When the sun set and the landscape descended into chilly darkness, he was still watching.

Nothing happened the next day, or the day after that. Sean wandered cold grey gravel plains looking for signs of life. He crept on his belly to look over the edges of the enormous rectangular holes that had been the foundations of the city, but there was nothing to see. Only smooth grey walls down which the occasional grey rock would bounce and click to the grey floor, far below. On the third day he saw movement on the horizon that gradually resolved itself into a dark shape. It seemed to be coming towards him.

Sean was thirsty. His mouth was dry, his tongue seemed

to be expanding. He wondered what had happened to Robert. The enemy AI captured him? In that case, why hadn't the AI come for Sean?

Being alone in the grey desolation had given Sean time to think. He realized that ever since Robert had boarded his ship he had kept events moving, constantly seeking to distract Sean from thinking about what was happening. Why had Robert brought him here? Surely not just to press a button. Why couldn't the machine have been set with a timer?

Sean watched the dark figure as it moved closer. He was becoming light-headed with thirst, his thoughts increasingly paranoid. Had Robert abandoned him? Had it all been a trick? Someone had kidnapped him, fooled him with a few computer projections, brought him to this planet and marooned him. Maybe he was being ransomed to his father even as he sat here. How much would his father pay to have the location of his only son revealed?

As evening descended the dark figure began to resolve itself into a humanoid shape. It was walking towards him. Sean watched as it picked a path around the edge of a large hole, and wondered whether to run or go to meet it. In the end he sat down and waited. He was too thirsty to do anything else.

Night descended and Sean slept. He awoke on the fourth day, weak and thirsty, and opened his eyes to see the dark figure staring down at him.

It took a few seconds for Sean to realize it wasn't human. It was a sick robot, its metal skin badly scratched. It was emitting a low humming, rasping sound as if its motors were filled with sand. Sean gave a dry cough and tried to get his thick tongue to move.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," said the robot. "Are you Sean? Robert Johnston sent me." The robot reached behind its back with an uneven, jerky movement. It took hold of a black flask and held it out. "He said you might want this. It's water."

Sean took the flask and unscrewed the top. The robot gave a buzz and spoke. "Robert said you weren't to drink too much. You could kill yourself. Just a little sip at first."

Sean said nothing. He took a little sip. It felt wonderful. He let the water run around his tongue for a moment and then spoke. "Who are you? Where's Robert?"

The robot sat down next to Sean. It took the flask from him. "That's enough for now," it said, fastening the top back on. "I'm not sure where Robert is at the moment. As to who I am, well, I was the enemy AI. I'm not sure what I am at the moment."

Sean forced himself to his feet. He stood for a moment, swaying, and looked down at the robot. The robot held up the flask. "There's no point running. I'm the one with the water. Anyway, I'm not going to harm you. Robert beat me."

Sean sat down again next to the robot. He gave a little smile. "So, the fast self-replicating machines worked, did they?"

The robot buzzed. Its eyes seemed to flicker slightly as it spoke. "The self-replicating machines?" it said. "Oh no, I had countermeasures in place to defeat them in a matter of seconds. They were just a diversion. Robert was very clever. While I was distracted, he triggered the

mechanism to make me replicate myself. Instead of fighting Robert, I began to fight copies of myself for control of my own system. First two, then four, then eight of me, all giving orders, all trying to use the same communication ports. As we multiplied we began to fill up the available memory. We began to scramble to find containers for our intelligence. I was lucky to find this robot, some of the other copies of me just... well."

Sean tried to look sympathetic. He gave an insincere frown. "Oh. I'm sorry."

The robot shrugged in reply. "Robert was designed by the Environment Agency AI. It's the cleverest there is. There's no shame in being beaten by the best. Anyway. Robert thinks there are about 20,000 of me remaining, all scattered through my former empire in inferior bodies such as this one. Each one speaking to a person just like yourself."

Sean took another sip of water. It tasted slightly sweet. He thought there must be more than water in the flask; he could feel his strength returning. He frowned. "Why? Why am I here?"

"I don't know. Robert says I have to learn how to make a positive contribution to society. The Environment Agency always sees it as a problem when AIs are allowed to develop and act in isolation. Apparently intelligence is not enough: I need to learn social skills as well. He thought maybe I could learn something from you."

Sean was furious. Robert had been laughing at him all along. This was his final joke. Sean was icy calm as he answered the robot. "Well, maybe you can learn from me. The Environmental Agency obviously believes not only in protecting life, but also in improving the quality of life."

"I don't understand what you mean," said the robot. "Obviously that is the sort of thing Robert intends me to learn." It tilted its head to look at Sean. "So, will you help me?"

"I don't have much choice," said Sean.

He gave a bitter laugh and, as he did so, he suddenly imagined he was looking down on himself, observing the scene. Two human figures illuminated by the rising sun, sitting on an empty grey planet, far from earth. The empty spaces where a proud, though paranoid, civilization had once laid its foundations punctuating the ground around them. Now they were about to begin the process of building a new future.

It was such a poetic image, Sean couldn't help wondering if it had been planned. Did the Environmental Agency AI plot things that deeply, all in its vision for a better galaxy? Just how intelligent was that AI?

Sean shuddered. He really did have no choice but to help the robot.

How could you fight something so single-minded?

Tony Ballantyne lives in Oldham, Lancashire (having moved there recently). He wrote "The Sixth VNM" (IZ 138), "Gorillagram" (IZ 139) and "Soldier.exe" (IZ 144), and he has also contributed fiction to various women's weeklies.

The real question," said Delius Feerce to the conference of cosmologists, "is how much imagination should we let into the data? And how much has already gotten in?"

"Hah!" cried the unhappy voice of Fred Sparrow from the back of the hall. "We don't let in nearly enough!"

The tall thin figure of Wilfred Cole-Borner raised his hand and said, "I don't mind its absence. After all, we do not write science fiction. Not yet, anyway."

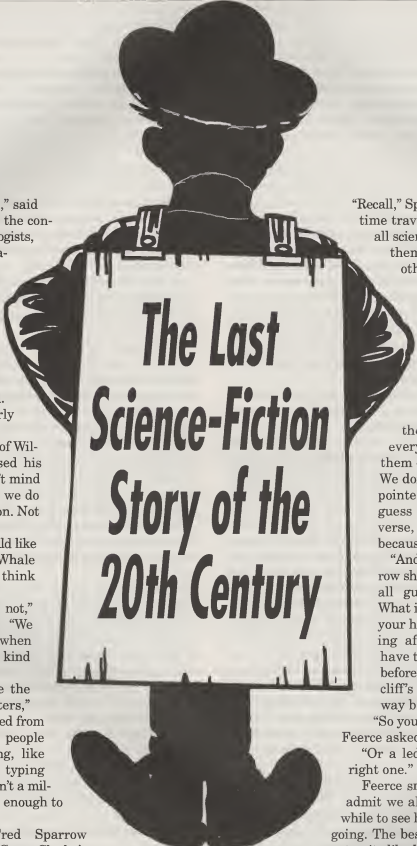
"Don't we? Fred would like more," said Richard Whale from the front row. "I think we have too much."

"We certainly do not," Sparrow said loudly. "We write the best kind, when given the chance. The kind that's true."

"We're nothing like the science-fiction writers," Delius Feerce continued from the podium. "Those people will imagine anything, like the million monkeys typing away, except there aren't a million of them, not even enough to matter."

"No, no, no!" Fred Sparrow shouted. "Remember Great Clarke's corollary – that only second- or third-rate scientists make fun of sf writers."

"Yes," the thin man said, "that's why all the first-raters make so many mistakes which the rest of us have to clean up."



The Last Science-Fiction Story of the 20th Century

"Recall," Sparrow said, "that fission, time travel, the multiverse, were all science fiction before we took them up. And there's a lot of other things on the way."

"You mean technological a-p-plications?" the thin man asked, tripping over his words. "Like tanks?" he added derisively. "That's for mechanics."

Feerce scowled from the podium. "Ideas are everywhere. But we flesh them out with data and facts. We don't guess. Great Asimov pointed out that it's easy to guess the nature of the universe, my dear Sparrow, because the choices are few."

"And Great Feynman," Sparrow shouted, "admitted that we all guess and guess again. What is induction but throwing your hat over a cliff and jumping after it? Sometimes you have to start like Bugs Bunny before he realizes he's over the cliff's edge – and work your way back before you fall."

"So you admit there's an edge?" Feerce asked. "Hah-hah to you, too."

"Or a ledge, if you can find the right one."

Feerce smiled. "Okay, Fred, let's admit we all take a peek once in a while to see how the science fiction is going. The best of it, I mean. But it's not quite like looking in the back of the book for the answers, is it?"

"First," Sparrow cried, "we must be ready and able to imagine anything! Einstein's free creations of the mind."

"But which must regain the realm of experience," Feerce said wearily, "through observation and experiment,

through an experience that anyone competent can repeat. Imaginairs tend to forget that part of Einstein."

"Phooey," Fred Sparrow said. "We work from each end, back and forth, and from the middle, and sometimes from God knows where – sideways!"

"Do cosmologists really talk like that?" the science-fiction writer asked at the simulation conference. "Or is this just our idea of how they act?"

"It's close, I think," said Felix Sorbonnes. "Look, if we can run these cosmologists forward as fast as possible, we might guess ahead to the final theory. They're pretty close, from what I saw at the last meeting. I think we've got the meeting simulation down pretty well. Let's hope the theory parts of the model are just as good."

"They're running simmies of us?" Feece asked.

"Yes," the thin man intoned, "to see where we may go."

"Have they got enough data?"

"Sure as shit!" Fred Sparrow shouted. "We're an open book! As far as initial conditions of character and such go, I mean. They're writers, for God's sake! They gossip and guess about human motivations for a living. And we help them out by writing autobiographies and memoirs, not to mention popularizations."

"No," the thin man said. "They can never have enough data, you know. The real thing, namely us, is much too complex."

"The real thing?" Fred Sparrow asked. "Imagination can overcome that – stochastic guessing, you know – but it can't be confirmed until after the fact, of course."

Sparrow came up to the podium and stood next to Feece. "You know, I can get us a look at their sims."

To a man, and six women, the cosmologists leaned forward in their chairs.

"What? You think I can't do it?" Sparrow asked.

"Watching sims of cosmologists," said the science-fiction writer, "is like cosmology used to be. Very few facts and lots of theory, and even more speculation."

"Yes, but let's speed 'em up. We don't have to hear all the discussion, do we?"

"I guess not."

"And another thing – do they have to talk about this sim as if they weren't part of it?"

"That's part of it."

"We really shouldn't let this kind of thing go on," Feece said. "Isn't there some law we could invoke against them simulating us?"

"No," Sparrow said.

"Then we must tell them that we can't and shouldn't be simulated, because we stand in at least relative objectivity to the universe – and it is precisely because we work back and forth – excuse me, forth – between theory and experiment, we are joined to the possibility of discovering truths."

"Really?" a mechanical voice asked over a dark screen.

"I thought all we knew are the models we make."

"I expressly deny that," the thin man said. "Always have. And I agree that this talk about simulating clusters of cosmologists, past, present, and... uh, young, will get us nowhere. No truth possible – no real experiment, no perception of the real world outside. Positively insular, if not solipsistic."

"Outside?" asked the mechanical voice from the black screen. "When were you last outside? What did you see outside of spacetime?"

"Come, come," Sparrow said in an unusually sober tone. "Let's not get off on the noumenal/phenomenal distinction in theory of knowledge. Most of you are incompetent to discuss the subject anyway, being either naïve realists or operational sceptics. It certainly wouldn't hurt to see what such simulations, such forced evolutions, might bring. They could guess right."

"Or they could guess what we will do as a group," the mechanical voice said, "and nothing about cosmology at all. Besides, we may be nothing more than someone's simulation right now."

"Stuff and nonsense," Cole-Borner said, "all this talk of the sociology of science."

"Outside?" the mechanical voice asked again, silencing the room. "Science-fiction writers only think they stand outside, because they can imagine holding the universe in the palm of their hand. We scientists think we can stand outside also, but we describe it more modestly as relative objectivity, operational truth, provisional truth, theory, and leave ourselves free to correct what gets embarrassing. But we too will forever know only the models, not the truth."

"Well, it's not as bad as all that," Cole-Borner said. "We're not at the stage of fantasy writers, who in a fit of pique abolished reality and said good riddance a long time ago."

"They too have something to say!" Sparrow shouted, "about the pit of hell in each of us – the interior!"

"All that muck," Cole-Borner muttered. "Next you'll be saying we can have control of gravity because the expansion of the universe is accelerating."

"Could very well be," Sparrow said softly.

"If I were writing that line of dialogue," Felix Sorbonnes said as he looked into the holotank, "I would have simply written, 'Could be!' But tell me, why have them talk about us simming them?"

"You have to let the sim run by itself," said Bruno Renaldo, his collaborator, "or we won't get what we want – a natural evolution of the simulation. Having them talk about the sim adds complexity to the run."

"Natural evolution?" Felix said. "Are you out of your mind? This is as mechanical as a basketball game played by a team of steam-powered mannequins."

"If we don't use this sort of thing," Bruno said, "then we won't be able to compete. Times have changed. If we don't do it this way, the programs used by e-editors themselves won't be able to read us, much less the e-editors, who won't even look at anything unless it's sim-assisted and pedigreed by submission programs. No one can know enough in enough fields to do it alone."

"You think so? Maybe I should have stayed retired."

"Then why did you come back?" Bruno asked.
"The love of it, I suppose. The idea that I could still be different."

"Differently dead," Bruno said, "if you don't catch on to all this, and fast."

"Darling!" Evelyn called out from downstairs. "Have you started your story yet?"

"No!" he answered. "I'm still running the sim of Sorbonnes-Renaldo, and they still don't have enough run-reach in their sub-sim of the cosmologists' meeting."

"Oh?" She sounded startled. "So how long?"

"Both sims are getting nowhere."

"So what's wrong?"

"It might be a glitch in the simsysys. They're guaranteed to produce unique outcomes. Maybe the simsys stochastic programmers forgot to measure the datamass."

"Call Lance!" Evelyn shouted. "Maybe it's something simple in the Mandelbrot kick-in."

"Good idea," he said, sitting back from the tank and watching Sorbonnes-Renaldo going about their business in front of their tank, in which the meeting of cosmologists seemed to be getting on toward a riot. Bruno and Felix looked too detached, and the disorder in their sim of the cosmologists seemed too uniform – not enough theoretical ripples were present to give him the first heave of inflation in his speculative universe, from which he might expand to artefact completion.

He cleared his holotank and called Lance.

"Lance?" he said as the head of his friend appeared; he seemed to be sitting in a big easy chair. "I need you to talk into my sim models for about 15 minutes, to enrich the mix. Got time?"

"Sure, Don. Be glad to."

"I've been wondering. What if we told the sim the truth?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean truthful answers to hard questions becoming part of the simulation."

"Ask one."

"This will go in as we speak."

"Go ahead."

"Can simmie runs of cosmologists contending yield any new knowledge?"

"It's all limited by the knowledge implicit in what they have already said," Lance said, "– and, of course, in the speculations implicit in what they have said, which may be wrong."

"I know that, but how about good guesses at what may turn out to be knowledge?"

"Good guesses. Yes."

"Well?"

"Right guesses would only acquire importance if brought to the court of observed evidence and experiment. Before then, they would be interesting, at best. You know that. Science fiction without the fiction."

"Yes, I know. But what about the possibility of finding some previously overlooked relationship among facts or theories, and suddenly having it yield new knowledge?"

Lance laughed. "Well, yes. But go try and do it."

"I'm trying."

Lance laughed. "Don't forget the fiction."

"I won't, believe me. You know, there's a moronic e-editor who keeps telling me to forget the fiction. He gets a thrill from the speculations alone, the son of a bitch. Wants me to forget about people."

"Oh, yes, him. This is still going into the modelling?"

"Why not?"

"No names," Lance said. "You know," he added musingly, "if all this is going to be part of what your modelling will draw on, it occurs to me that you're setting up a complex smoke-and-mirrors system. If it gets complex enough, it might just light up in strange ways."

"Do you really think so?" Don asked.

"Could be. What else do you have?"

"You know about the *synthetic a priori*? New knowledge not derived from experience. Immanuel Kant. Invented pure research. Get something new out of what a lot of people missed."

"Oh, that," Lance said. "It's scarce, that kind of discovery."

"Why?"

"Well, even mathematical knowledge, so-called discoveries like Gödel's Proof, The Ontological Argument, or even parts of Relativity, involve reasoning about experience, even if the reasoning seems to be only about ideas."

"So there's no blue-sky speculation, or Einstein's free creations of the mind?"

"Not really," Lance replied. "But such attempts are usually wrong, despite the reality of the ideas present. You see, it's how they go together that either matches or conflicts with our experimental experience and observation of the universe we live in. It's hard to escape the honesty of nature."

"I guess that settles it, then," Don said.

"Just remember, to write good science fiction, you have to know the leading edge of observation and experiment, then the theories, then the history of the ideas, and then do the speculative play with some constraint – in that order. And by starting with the last, playing, most sf fails."

"There's a writer I know who loves to say that you don't have to do all that to write science fiction. Just borrow from what's been done."

"Yeah, just rearrange the furniture. What you lose there is the way novel factors of change will affect people in new ways. I repeat, by starting with speculation, with the last thing on my list, science fiction will fail. It mostly has. Might as well write fantasy, which much of it is by default. I don't blame outright fantasy. It's dead set against the kind of universe we live in – but then fails when it doesn't invent new constraints of its own. Brave, though, to take the world entire and remake it to our heart's desire. Omar Khayyam."

"Even lots of money doesn't encourage ambition," Don said. "It only encourages the popularity that it created, and won't permit a rise in quality."

"You bet. We have hurled our visions against the intractable future since Mary Shelley warned us of the inner monster."

"And the monster is the market."

"No – it's us, what's inside us all."

"So what do we do?" Don asked.

"Maybe don't connect what's inside us to too much power, lest it magnify our faults."

"Oh, yes, like the tragic Krell, in the old movie."

"Yeah, in one night of rending and tearing, as their dream machines materialized and sent out their worst aggressions. Yes, Extreme Science Fiction is the only way to do it."

Alone again, with his new sims all run and done, with Bruno Renaldo and Felix Sorbonnes shut down, and with the shell structure in place, Don began to compose:

As Jason's body swelled to the size of a dozen solar systems, he approached the galactic black hole with the idea that he might grow large enough to swallow it himself. Would it give him indigestion, he wondered. The surrounding stars were pinpricks of warmth on his body, long ago bio-engineered to survive the vacuum and the airlessness of space. He had explored while inflating, sweeping through the spiral arms, knowing that sooner or later he would look to this monstrous centre, when he was large enough to survive its terrors...

Don stopped writing, knowing he'd have to get the conditions at galactic centre right, then violate them, if needed to make a better story. It was a rule, to show your colleagues that you knew where to get it right, where to get it wrong, and where to blue-sky:

But Jason pulled back and looked beyond the Galaxy of his birth, to the Monster Clusters that had stood since the early universe, and were the best proof that the expansion was accelerating. What if he could swallow one of those! What might he become? Might he expand faster than the expansion, and run into – what?

No, Don thought suddenly. This is no good. Sheer megalomania. Someone had once said that sooner or later a science-fiction writer will go off his nut. He would have to write something else, something more meaningful, closer to home.

He wrote:

The great alien visitor, Azu, summarized his experience of humankind. After a century of covert observation, Azu wrote:

The judgments of humankind about itself are hopelessly tainted. Despite millions dead and more millions living in torment, their literatures speak of "humanity" and "compassion," in which they forgive themselves and speak of courage in the midst of carnage. They congratulate themselves in their literatures on their humanity. They pass judgment on themselves when they have no ground from which to judge themselves. Truth would require that they speak against themselves, but look who would be talking! Human goodness is scattered. It lacks all consistency and strength. On occasion a human has written as I do about his kind – a man named Swift, for

one – but most fear self-hatred, and fail to complete the task of liberating themselves...

Don stopped writing. Here he was, attempting to step back from his humanity, yet still imprisoned by it; this was in fact only a fictional position. The alien judge was not present to speak of human goodness and evil. The independent, unimpeachable ground was not there to stand on, except in his imagination. There was no way for his kind to see itself without error and purblindness. "Ah, yes," Azu said within him, "but if only you could be still and contemplative enough, your kind might see itself more clearly. And one day your actions would be sane."

Yet he wondered how Mark Twain had written about "the damned human race" as if he were only a visitor to its endocrinological shore, and could see clearly. What if we encountered a highly advanced alien race and asked them what they thought of us and we didn't like the answer, Don wondered. Would a highly uncomplimentary judgment be considered racist? Wasn't it self-serving for humanity to label critical views of itself misanthropic? Racism was a term used to compare human families of equal standing; but what if we co-encountered genuine superiority and it held a low opinion of us? Would that be racism or a simply a descriptive statement of fact, carrying no hatred?

But we have no experience of anything other than ourselves, he told himself, so how can we look at ourselves as if from outside? We have no alien race, or even an artificial intelligence to make comments about us, he reminded himself, but stepping back from ourselves was an accepted technique. Therapists had once been called "alienists," and there was a vast literature of self-examination called history, sociology, and psychology.

What kind of judgment would a genuine superior make of us, Don asked himself. Would it be worse than our own past self-condemnations? It might not mean that an alien superior would do anything hostile toward us. They might simply hold a low opinion of us. Maybe that was the answer to Fermi's Paradox, the reason we haven't received any visitors. "Where are they?" Fermi asked. Maybe the answer was "right here." They are us, come here long ago and now left alone to mature, isolated to prevent damage to our development... or better still as an answer to Fermi, it's still early days in the cosmos and we're all babies yet, unable to talk to other babies!

Ah, but what does "superior" really mean? Maybe if you meet someone who finishes not only your sentences but completes your thoughts before you can say them, who can do whatever you do from the first steps you take, develop it further, and then tell you it's not very important, while you stand there with your *Physical Review* paper ready to be mailed and know that it was a wasted effort, then it might be safe to say you've encountered a superior intellect.

Then, if that intellect attempts to kill you out of contempt, Don thought, then you might say it's racist; but if the superior entity restricts itself only to telling you what it thinks of you, then racist doesn't cover the situation. Racism is an ethical charge regarding actions,

which tends to be used loosely.

Don wrote:

Learn to see how others see you.

Humankind learned this – and didn't like it.

Three opinions of humankind came in from the Galaxy – by radio, which should have been a tipoff about the “advanced nature of the civilizations” that sent them.

The reviews were not good.

At first they were believed to be hoaxes perpetrated by self-hating misanthropes. Then the truth dawned: the opinions were being offered in the hope of hoisting us up to the level of a breakout species.

I'm not a misanthrope, Don insisted to himself. I don't really hate enough to be a great writer.

He started again:

His brother, a therapist, managed to get him into a group that included three aliens.

“Did you know?”

“Of course I knew,” his brother said. “They need therapy just like everybody else. Especially having to deal with human beings.”

He looked at his brother and saw strange eyes looking at him.

“Look, I'll tell you the truth. All therapists are aliens. It's how we decided to save this world. Invade and treat. We do have an objective view, you know.”

“You mean...”

“Yes, you're one too. For centuries now. Earth was colonized more than a million years ago, and only now is the integration of minds becoming possible. The physiologies were bio-joined a long time ago, but the different brains still whisper to each other in unpredictable ways...”

No, Don thought. That wasn't quite right either.

He started again:

I heard the alien slide toward the confessional booth. He entered and the door slid shut. I sat in my priestly place and waited for the screen to open.

It opened – and the terrible face of an alien God stared right into me, delving into my failings and virtues alike, into what I might do but never would. The alien wanted the sins of heart, the sins of desire, more than he wanted actual wrongdoing. What I had done I might not have done willingly, but the undone sins were those that I embraced freely, because I did not fear their doing. That was what he wanted...

As I waited for him/her/it to know me, to drink deeply of me, for reasons that seemed to be no more than that it could do so, I wondered about the need that might exist more deeply.

Later, at the tavern, I would have much to tell...

Don didn't like this story much either, but he did not delete it; he never knew when even the second-rate might be needed.

He started again, this time with a title:

Nanoguy

There were five of us to start, to be born in the Small, and to have the voice of God guiding us in our life's work. We were very lucky. We did the job for which we had been made.

But when we started to reproduce, the God of the Big decided to destroy us. There were just too many of us, so they sent the Mechs after us, to wipe us out...

We fought them as best we could, but they kept getting smaller to evade our defences. The day would come, we knew, when they would be so small that we could not stop them...

He stopped, unhappy with how this beginning was going. He rummaged in his notes and started anew:

Starship Meadow

Starship Meadow is a strange place. The grass is bright green, even in winter, and never grows taller than a foot. There is a silence when you step into the meadow from the surrounding forest. You listen to the stillness, and after a few moments you begin to see the starships.

You see their differing shapes as they shimmer with the effort to become real, and you yearn for them in a sickly way that won't let you rest until you see them solid, standing heroically under a blue sky, or under bright stars, poised for whatever may be asked of them.

And you find yourself with a group of people, dressed in spacesuits and survival gear, marching toward the ships, ready to undertake the mission that is just now coming into your mind, as if someone were making it up for you from one moment to the next.

Of course, you say to yourself, how perfect, how right that we shall do this thing; it needs to be done, and we will be the ones to do it.

But he had no idea of what they were to do, Don thought, what great accomplishment there was beyond the sky that waited to be pierced by these starships, and it would take too long for him to wait until something occurred to him. He had waited for too many trains of inspiration in his youth to believe that they ran on time or anywhere near it, or were even coming his way.

And for the first time in his life he doubted the storyteller's art, by which events and character were honestly explained in a series of fictitious actions through the suspending of disbelief, and the writer hid in the shadows beyond the light that fell on the page. The post-modernists told the truth about how fiction was written, but what did it get them to say so? What did it lose them to say so? They probably couldn't write fiction, and, worse, didn't want to learn.

And science fiction was nearly impossible. The acceleration of history and innovation was slowly putting a stop to science fiction. All attempts at foresight hit an event

horizon at a century or more hence, maybe sooner. Only if change remained arithmetic or slower, could the science fiction still be written. Only by putting the brakes on science fiction could one still write it – by looking backward more than forward! Post-apocalyptic stories were just the thing without seeming archaic. Alternative histories...

Bah, to write past the event horizon of change! To find a way that no one knew about! To see the future, or some set of possibilities as if one had travelled there and back. Ah, to avoid one's science fiction becoming fantasy by default.

Maybe there was something in the postmodernists' honesty of refusal?

He picked up the shorter version of *The Idiot's Guide to the History of Ideas* and read:

"Post-modern fictional techniques, by calling attention to the author, by addressing the reader directly and thus breaking the illusion of story, seem to want to gain more attention and credit for the author. Undue credit and attention, since the suspension of disbelief has not been accomplished and is openly derided."

He laughed for a moment at the worded derided, since it made a justly deserved pun on the name of the principal theoretician of post-modernism, Jacques Derrida.

"While it may be granted that many authors who work in this mode attain effective, suggestive, even emotional moments in such explicit fictions, we may still question the worth of the accomplishment, however intelligent and polished. Does not the author already have enough attention with her byline under the title? Is not the all-enveloping illusion of virtual words to be preferred to running commentaries and guerrilla confrontations with the reader? Connecting the dots on the reader's part may not be the best that fiction can do. Nothing is harder than the third-person story built on the plan of exposition, development, and drama."

Don had to try it. It might get him going beyond the ease of openings, across the sea of middles that would earn and deserve their endings. Maybe he could work both sides of the street, real and unreal.

He felt the drama of the struggle within himself as he wrote:

Let me tell you the kind of opening scene I'd like to have written here, but won't. It would have been striking, but it's much better to get your attention in this way instead – without trying to hide the truth about fiction, that there is only a writer telling the story, that it's not real. I can indicate the skill and the power that might have been if I had really written it in the old way.

You know already that I could have done this, but I won't, so the story will be a failure according to the old models; but it will be a success in how well I tell you what might have been, which has its own sweetness.

One scene, however, will be great in the old way, but you'll have to see which one it is for yourself. The old narrative telltales won't help you. I've earned a right to break the old rules, to experiment.

So, before my patience lapses, here goes:

Galaxies of the Boötes Void

His shadow was black on the green grass as he pushed the old, noisy lawnmower. Man that is born of woman, or whatever, has but a short time to live and is cut down by a lawnmower, he thought as he fell over. He lay there, unconscious on the noisy machine that cut the grass of the universe, the g-type yellow suns that brightened out of the clumping dust and warmed the soup of life. The noise went through him, sending his shadow between the stars, into the thinly seeded void of Boötes.

Irregular. Small. Unable to grow. These galaxies had no others to eat, not enough material to make the regular, sweeping arms of the bright spirals in the main groups...

He thought distantly of his kind, who didn't know enough about who they were – where they came from and where they might be going. They came from the fierce hearts of stars cooking the elements, from the stinking bio-cauldrons of shards and planets that scattered the chemicals of life, from the playing fields of evolution where enemies were bested and friends gathered, and where only the players kept score.

Here in the great void of Boötes, he was neither he-man nor she-man, absurdly small, yet great in understanding that would give him nothing beyond itself. It was an end in itself. The basket was finally stitched shut and the ball would not fall out again to permit the game to continue.

He saw flashes in the corners of his eyes, and somehow knew that these were from the big bang itself, coming to him across time, bright in the Boötes void.

But why should he see this light? Were his eyes attuned? Was something trying to signal him?

The lawnmower growled like a cosmic beast, filling the universe, a fossil-fuelled version of Newton's clockwork universe.

The engine coughed and sputtered...

...and stopped before a deafening silence...

He opened his eyes.

Grass stood around him. It was the strongest life in the universe. Stronger than brains – because it believed in itself and nothing else. With great confidence it grew. The grass had a wonderful confidence.

Black flowed across blue sky...

Stars burned through the coal-shell of night, spearing his swollen heart with pain as it beat to take toll of the red river that no longer emptied into the sea.

George Zebrowski lives in Delmar, New York. He first made a name for himself as an sf writer in the 1970s, and says, "maybe it's time I should appear again in a British sf magazine, having published early stories in *New Worlds*." Of his many books, the most recent include the prize-winning novel *Brute Orbits* (1998) and a new collected stories scheduled for early 2002.



REVIEWED

The Gaze Against God

John Clute

Here is the story of a Rogue Male who goes away to fight the Future in 1939 and never comes back. As the novel begins – it is of course Geoffrey Household's great *Rogue Male* (1939) – the unnamed protagonist has just escaped from Germany, having almost been apprehended in an attempt, or so the authorities claim, to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The never-named hero – we are never told if he is in fact guilty of the attempted killing – soon finds himself harassed by agents of the appalling government of 1939's Britain. A nausea, a vastation as nauseous as any found in any Kafka story about souls buried alive in the dead-end Gnostic darkness of the world, afflicts him. So he goes to ground. (I tend to think of him as K. Unbound. So let him be K.)

From his lair, K. gazes at the 20th-century world, and finds it riddled with disease. His gaze is the oracular, incriminated, fixed, fascinated Ballard Gaze of a surgeon, or a Martian, or a crash victim, or Toad in August: August 1914. But finally K. shakes himself free of his own stare, and begins to act. The novel is almost done. Our last sight is of the hero disappearing into the dark, en route to Germany. This time he intends to make no mistake. He will turn the tables on the apparatchiks who have confiscated Toad Hall. He will do exactly what they have accused him of trying to do: he will assassinate Adolf Hitler. As we close the last page of *Rogue Male* (at least if we did so in 1939), we understand that if nothing happens really quite soon K. will have failed, the Future will have won. Ah.

It is commonly assumed that the heirs of Geoffrey Household, who are also the children of the Future K. did

not in fact halt, are thriller writers. But Household's true genius as a writer was arguably not to work as a modernizing bridge between John Buchan and Len Deighton, or only in the sense that both these writers share something of the unclubbable abyssal gaze of exile that marks almost every piece of fiction he wrote, from *The Terror of Villadonga* (1936) down to his final lament for Eden lost, *Arrows of Desire* (1985), set in a Britain that has gone down the long shoot for good. Household was an alien presence in this island, a little world he hardly saw between 1920 and the War that K. failed to avert. He bore the virus of estrangement, and his true heir – if one places Mervyn Peake and his Edifice gingerly to one

side – is arguably J. G. Ballard himself, who never saw England till his late teens, the Ballard of the Ballard Gaze (the Gaze from the Camp), the Ballard whose heroes go to ground in the poisonous pockmarks of our irradiated world city.

High-rise apartment blocks, abandoned ganties and lounges bedded into the Florida rust, covert Edens within the Motorway roundabouts, surreally subfusc semi-detacheds in Shepperton: from these pus-raddled enclaves, these topological transforms of the badger sets of yore, Ballard's exiles gaze in a state of impassive amaze outwards into a world many of us now think Ballard has described uniquely. Natives find this Ballardian Amaze peculiarly insulting, perhaps because it seems affectless and therefore disloyal – displays of affect in social contexts, which are necessarily obedient to the rules of the world they take place in, are famously dangerous for exiles; and a lot of English social comedy fuels itself, disreputably, on the failures of foreigners to emote with propriety. Ballard has always refused to play the game, a game (incidentally) no exile has ever won and no exile ever will. Seen through the prism of the books he writes, he is, therefore, disloyal to the rules of community living (he was "disloyal" to science fiction as well, because he predicted the actual junk outcome of the space race, and was deeply hated for a long while in America, and may still be); he is disloyal to the story.

The novels of J. G. Ballard of the past several decades articulate the vision of maybe the first post-War writer actually to see what was happening to the world, that it was turning into the detritus of a great two-century historical spasm whose legacy is a profound depression of the human race. The vision these novels embody is as treasonous to our late-heat-death capitalist empires as the eyes of the boy who stares down the Emperor naked; and *Super-Cannes* (Flamingo, £16.99), his latest, also embodies that cleansing treason.

But though it is a wise book, and a prophetic one, it is not – to get this out of the way immediately – a very good novel. It is too long, too monotone, too bored with how much more it conveys than its protagonist can comprehend, too easy in its repetition of tropes long mastered by its author, too rehearsed to rank with the work of a few decades ago, with those early novels and tales. Unlike those pomp novels from the decade 1965-1975, *Super-Cannes* is profoundly belated.

It is a thriller, but the plot – late Household stories, like the defective *Rogue Justice* (1982), have the same defect – unpacks with a pottering indifference to pace. A middle-aged walk-



ing-wounded named Paul Sinclair, who has married a young doctor from the hospital where he'd been very slowly recovering from the leg wound he inflicted on himself by crashing his vintage airplane on the runway, follows his pert, slightly louche bride to Cannes, where she has hired on for six months as a locum in Eden-Olympia, a combination industrial park and gated community. The previous doctor had been shot dead a little while earlier, after running rampage and killing ten people.

Supinely calm and (frankly) thick, Paul only very slowly senses that something is rotten in Eden, that the mass murder (which slowly begins to obsess him) was somehow symptomatic of something more than an unleashing of mere individual psychopathology. He also, inchworm, becomes haunted by the CEOs and consultants and high-powered facilitators and scientists who work in Eden, for they exhibit the oiled san-serif blankness of some polished Stepford Honcho gliding on invisible broadloom into any VIP lounge of any airport in the developed world, the world that makes the ears ping from the depth of that unprecedented planet-wide depression Ballard has never shirked describing. But Eden is also their home. How do they handle the stresses of the work? How do they have fun? How do they stay aloft?

We soon discover that *Super-Cannes* is not really a thriller at all but a Godgame, a term which usefully describes stories, like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or Mozart's *Magic Flute* or John Fowles's *The Magus* (1965), in which a behind-the-scenes Magus guides the young hero and heroine through a labyrinth of maya, testing them nearly to destruction before light dawns and they find they have passed the test; they are now welcome into the brave new world. The Magus in this case, Wilder Penrose, argues the case of Eden-Olympia to Paul (that its inhabitants live and work so hard, and are so protected within the Gates, that they have willingly and properly ceded their social and moral concerns to the corporations they ostensibly run and hence to Eden-Olympia itself; but Paul slowly smells a rat. Why were he and his wife given the very house her predecessor had used? Why is he given clues by the Eden staff, it seems unwillingly, that force him to inquire deeper?

What he finds is what we already know he's going to find: like a thousand demented Jekylls, the shits who run our world from Eden.com outgas their tensions by doing Recreational Hyde gigs in nearby civilian communities, mainly Cannes itself, where they rob and rape and murder at will. The previous doctor, having found the

Hyde within him intolerable in daylight, had actually planned not a mass murder but a mass execution of the priests of the New Order. Penrose simply cannot figure out why. Paul and his wife have been locked into a Godgame of timed-release revelations; their reactions to this ordeal may tell him what went wrong with their predecessor.

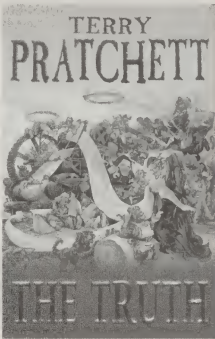
Having missed most of this for most of the book (unlike its readers), our lame hero finally acts. Orpheus-like, he drags his wife from the pit and sends her on her way. Then, as in *Rogue Male*, he decides to do the job right this time. He will take up his arms and, grave and impassive and alone, he will try to assassinate the monsters at the heart of the poison labyrinth. He sets off on this mission. We do not know if he will be successful, for the novel closes at this point, a slingshot ending astonishingly like Household's. But *Rogue Male* gave its 1939 readers a sense of the great importance of any chance the hero might actually pull it off. *Super-Cannes* does not give its readers in 2000 any tools to care with, one way or the other, beyond the op-ed sententiae that give it what life it does possess. It leaves us dry.

If the Discworld turned, which I believe it doesn't, then it would be spinning now, because *The Truth* (Doubleday, £16.99), Terry Pratchett's 25th novel in the series, gives the whole planet something of a shake. It has been an *idée fixe* of critics (this reviewer included) that Pratchett should be listened to very closely when he hints, as he has done at least once, that his Discworld comedies hover at the edge of falling into his-

tory, and that he has fought against taking them down. He has changed his mind, however, or lost the battle, with *The Truth*, which is located somewhere between teeter and tocsin. The Industrial Revolution, in the form of the printing press and the daily newspaper, has finally begun to agitate Ankh-Morpork, the city at the heart of the flat Disc on top of Et Cetera, plunging through space toward Who Knows. It will be very interesting to find out what will happen next. (My guess is that Ankh-Morpork, like London, will increasingly inhabit a world of clock and engine; and that the rest of the Discworld will increasingly become definable as a set of polders, enclaves of heightened reality armoured against Time, like the cornices that rim Hell. But Who Knows.)

The comedy this time round, like most Discworld stories in which Commander Vimes or Lord Vetinari figure, is filigreed with dark. Vetinari – despite a tendency to sound like John Cleese doing Robin Hood in *Time Bandits* – increasingly applies his chilly Realpolitik mind to the task of making Ankh-Morpork, which he runs, a place sentient beings might actually wish to inhabit. Vimes is what he has grown into as the years pass and the books gain moral heft. The plot revolves around young William de Worde, who starts a newspaper (called the *Times*) which eats Story raw and roars for more, inspiring a posse of dwarfs to invent a printing press to feed it, and the cat is out of the bag. The main story that de Worde finds himself investigating is an attempt to frame Vetinari for attempted murder, so a cabal of arch conservatives can turn the clock back. Framing a man of Vetinari's strategic genius is a pretty feeble idea; the only way Pratchett can make it even marginally plausible is to keep Vetinari unconscious for most of the novel, which he does. There are several characters in *The Truth* who are unlikely to appear again – mainly a pair of killers (comically reminiscent of the killer duo in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*) whose plots necessarily misfire, but who are pretty nasty stuff for a Discworld book all the same. Others may remain, like Otto the vampire news photographer, whose protests-too-much uncannily resemble those uttered by the vampire hero of *The Tenth Kingdom*. There are fewer jokes than usual, but they are as good as ever.

De Worde's savage aristocrat father, as hints have told us from almost the beginning, is the villain of the piece; his defeat is the defeat of the wrong kind of past. The press wins; and young de Worde already needs more stories for the *Times* to come, stories to make the future up, and the sky is



bared of the shelter of old deco-rums, and the cat is out of the bag, as Vetinari knows. "Free men," he says, closing the novel and opening Discworld, "Pull in all kinds of directions... It's the only way to make progress. That and, of course, moving with the times. Good day to you."

Here is the news of the year. His *Dark Materials* is done. Philip Pullman has finally released *The Amber Spyglass* (Scholastic, £14.99), 550 pages of it, volume three of what is in fact one sustained novel, now complete. The war against God is triumphantly concluded in this astonishing book, maybe the finest "children's book" of the 20th century, which it ends. We are all the victors.

It is not, however, a tale which can really be reviewed. (I'm not referring here to Scholastic's extraordinary Confidentiality Agreement, which anyone who needed a proof copy had to sign. By the terms of this Agreement, I am not permitted to divulge anything relevant about *The Amber Spyglass* until three months after publication – which means, I suppose, that I must continue to keep my mouth shut for another three months or so, during which period anyone who simply buys the bloody thing in a shop can say what they want about it. But not to worry: anything uttered here that is even remotely relevant has been taken from a bought copy of *The Amber Spyglass* as previously published by Alfred A. Knopf in the United States.) It is not a tale which can be responded to quickly in review form, because it is too multitudinous to encompass fast, or maybe ever; because its implications continue indefinitely to sink into the mind, just as the golden Dust, which the Christians abhor, sinks into the physical world and utters it singing, the Dust which is angels singing the world – "The physical world which is our true home and always was," as a ghost betrayed by religion says in the very middle of the book, in a great harrowing sequence set in Hell – the world God refuses us permission to wed.

The Amber Spyglass concludes the story of Lyra, which began in volume one, *Northern Lights* (1995), set mostly in a world similar to ours, with a Steampunk texture straitened by the dominance of a theocracy whose doctrines and practices (including a hot-sweat and purient taste for inflicting pain on "sinners") closely resembles our own world's Roman Catholic Church of yore, though the central figures Pullman depicts, here and in later volumes, exude a World-Despite which is purely Protestant; in Lyra's world, all human beings are linked to familiars, here called daemons, who complete their companions

by somehow manifesting them to the world, while at the same time remaining profoundly communicant with their hosts or companions.

Daemons speak into and for humans. It is a mark of Pullman's urgent subtlety, whenever he deals with his daemons, transcending utterly as he does the elements of cliché inherent in the idea of a creature familiar, that the reader is at once irresistibly reminded of Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicomeral Mind* (1976), for the daemons sound uncannily like the "external" voices Jaynes thinks constituted a form of consciousness before we began (around the time of Homer) to introject our daemons, who entered our skulls to become the self-conscious internal monologues which thread the stories that make us. Later arguments – especially in *The Amber Spyglass* – about being human are fully consistent with a sense that the daemons of Lyra's world are the voices we tell ourselves with; that we all have daemons; it is just that we cannot see them.

Spyglass also concludes Will's story, begun in volume two, *The Subtle Knife* (1997), which starts on our Earth but segues through portals, here called windows, into another world (not Lyra's) whose population has been decimated by spectres. Spectres eat human "souls" as soon as their potential victims are old enough (just around puberty) to be tasty. Will's acquisition of the titular Subtle Knife, which is also known as Aeshaetter, or God Killer, allows him to slice windows from world to world. *The Subtle Knife* is perhaps overfull of window-slicing exploits – but once again the author is ahead of us. After Will's search through the worlds for his

father has ended tragically, in the terrible sad pages that close this volume, and after Lyra's Lilith-like mother has kidnapped her once again, and *The Subtle Knife* shuts tight in the midst of almost unendurable trauma, we open *The Amber Spyglass* with some sense that the exploits and harings-about, that so compulsively fill the first two volumes, may necessarily give way to something more sombre; perhaps, even, something more calm.

In a way, this happens. There are three central threads which must reach resolution, before we can feel the story has been told. The first is the war against the Authority (Pullman's term for the Kingdom of Heaven and its Monarch in this and other worlds); this war, begun by Lyra's father, Lord Asriel, in volume one, must climax now. The second thread is the story of Dust: what is it, why is it leaking from the worlds? We are told. The third thread, ultimately the gravest and most important, is the Fall of Eve. Methodically, meditatively, *The Amber Spyglass* picks up these seemingly scattered pieces of the tale, and resolves them.

Thread One: In scenes of great kinetic splendour, the Authority is overthrown. Aeshaetter is used, so subtly that it is possible to miss the moment entirely; and God Himself is freed. This happens at least 100 pages from the end of the novel, and almost off-hand; the real action is elsewhere.

Thread Two: the Dust is a kind of noösphere. It is the alembication of all the consciousnesses of all the worlds; it is (as in Hermetic philosophy) an infinitely intimate entanglement of angels dancing; but the Dust is sick. The reasons for this are sufficiently complex not to be brooded about at any great length in a first review: suffice it that the sickness of the golden Dust has a great deal to do with Despite – the world that J. G. Ballard gazes upon is a plot that sickens Dust – and, in a plot sense, is tied to the use and/or misuse of the Subtle Knife, which cuts chasms between the worlds at a very great cost. This must stop.

Thread Three: Lyra is Eve, and she must fall. She and Will must move, slowly and with the deepest reverence possible, towards sexual union, towards the Fall of Eve the Christian foes have been desperately attempting to stymie. If they do not make love, the angels will die, the peoples will shrivel: because it is only life that makes life, and life only exists in the real, the physical, the utter beingness of the world. Mary – the lapsed nun who shepherds Will and Lyra into their glory, the maker of the "amber spyglass" through which it has been possible to trace the haemorrhaging of Dust into abysses of Nada beneath the



Cover artwork for
The Amber Spyglass
by Philip Pullman

worlds of flesh – watches the children as they return:

There was no need for the glass; she knew what she would see; they would seem to be made of living gold. They would seem the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance.

The Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all.

There is more, much more, too much more to say. There are, for instance, the 100 pages devoted to Lyra and

Will's passage into the land of the dead (which Pullman describes in terms highly evocative of Wyndham Lewis's *Childermass*; amusingly so, given the fact that Lewis's hero is named Pullman); I think these pages may be the most terrifying transit of Hell ever composed. And there is the end of the story. It also takes 100 pages to tell. They are not easy pages, though they are certainly right.

For the children-no-longer-children, as golden lads and girls all must, pay dearly: for they are us. Balance is all. Gates must be shut on childhood and the God-shattering lubricities of

human childhood. The daemons must take their final form and gaze their humans straight. For the world is us; we are the world. There is nothing else. The Kingdom of Heaven is no more. Lyra sits in the Botanic Garden, in the Oxford she was born to. She tells her daemon that now they are here, now that the Kingdom is no more, they must build. She pauses for a long moment.

"And then what?" said her daemon sleepily. "Build what?"

"The Republic of Heaven," said Lyra. There is nothing else.

John Clute

Frank Drake, an early pioneer of SETI, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, derived a famous equation which gives an estimate of the number of technological civilizations in our galaxy. Each term in his equation represents the probability of a condition necessary for the evolution and survival of any one civilization (including ours): from the average rate of star formation and the fraction of stars which are long-lived and which have planets, to the number of planets on which life develops, the proportion of those life-bearing planets on which intelligence develops, the fraction of intelligent species which develop technology, and the average lifetime of a technological civilization. All of these terms are highly speculative, and dozens of hard science-fiction writers have built novels on the consequences of varying one or more of them.

And so to the second volume of Stephen Baxter's "Manifold" trilogy, *Space* (Voyager, £16.99), where we begin to understand his Cunning Plan, which may be nothing less than a forensic examination of the extremes of those terms of the Drake equation which are to do with intelligence. In the first volume, *Time*, the probability of intelligent species arising was set to the minimum: none but ourselves, and our siblings. *Space*, a right-angled self-contained variant of its predecessor, tackles another term of the Drake equation, the lifetime of technological civilizations. Malenfant, who appeared in *Time* as a restless entrepreneur and self-styled space cadet, is recast as a booster for the search of extraterrestrial life and the answer to Enrico Fermi's paradox: in a Galaxy several billion years old, containing hundreds of billions of stars, why are there no great star-spanning civilizations?

Called to the Moon, Malenfant is vouchsafed a revelation by a reclusive, scarily brilliant Japanese researcher, Nemoto. She shares with Malenfant her discovery of evidence for the arrival of aliens in the Solar System's asteroid belt: the Gaijin, robot-like hive creatures. With the help of a pri-

The Long Run

Paul J. McAuley

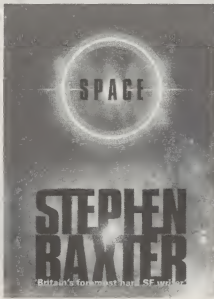
vate company, Bootstrap (sharing the name of Malenfant's company in *Time*, but owned by another impulsive entrepreneur, Frank Paulis), Malenfant travels to the Gaijin's point of origin in the Solar System, a

gravitational focus or saddlepoint beyond Pluto's orbit, where a gateway teleports him to Alpha Centauri.

There's a network of these saddlepoint gateways it turns out, left (as these things so often are in hard sf novels) by an older, long-vanished race. While the Gaijin pursue their enigmatic investigation of Earth, and a fear-somely destructive alien race, the Crackers, sweeps towards the Solar System, Malenfant and a few other humans travel from star to star, finding that life emerges everywhere it can, and Nemoto uncovers evidence of ancient attempts to planform Venus. But what happened to those ancient engineers, and why is it that aliens have arrived just as humans have begun to move beyond the Earth?

Baxter addresses these questions with characteristic brio. *Space*, thriftily recycling his Saddlepoint series of stories, is a novel of ideas in the grand tradition of core sf. Its narrative, effortlessly spanning several centuries and marshalling a large cast of characters who by different paths travel hopefully towards revelation, is both informed by an unsentimental scientific rigor and suffused with that peculiar strain of wistful melancholy found so strongly in works by Olaf Stapledon and Arthur C. Clarke.

As John Maynard Keynes once wrote, in the long run we are all dead, and so here. The Solar System – the whole Galaxy – is littered with the remains of ambitious engineering works and the detritus of bitter wars, and for much of *Space*, as in Baxter's "Xeelee" future history, humanity seems of very little account compared to the great work of alien races, and the even greater perspective of Galactic history. Intwoven with explorations of the saddlepoint network are episodic glimpses of the slow decline of human civilization, of civil wars fought over "the diminishing resources of a declining planet" and colonies huddled on inhospitable moons. The energetic schemes of Frank Paulis only temporarily terraform the Moon, and its brief comet summer quickly declines into a scarcity civilization;





attempts by one of the star-traveling astronauts to subvert the fate of alien races all come to grief; only the schemes of Nemoto, rendered as inhuman as the Gajin by life-extension treatments, have any real effect, for she alone takes the long view.

Just as Baxter's galaxy is full of ruins of previous civilizations, so his text is full of deliberate echoes of his predecessors. Malenfant's trip through the saddlepoint gateway and his arrival at an interstellar Grand Central Station parallels Bowman's trip through the Jupiter monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*; the ancient and increasingly inscrutable Nemoto's ruthless, cryptic schemes resemble the ruthless, cryptic schemes of the transformed, hyperintelligent hero of Larry Niven's *Protector*; there's a superb pastiche of H. Rider Haggard, set in a strange African empire built around a natural nuclear reactor; a knowing quote from Blish's classic short story "Surface Tension." All this contributes to the novel's richly inventive and deeply felt texture, and even if it closes, as it opens, with awkward scenes in which characters stand still and have everything *explained* to them, there's a nicely bitter-sweet twist which in true sense-of-wonder style recasts the scale of the entire story. Accomplished, ambitious and challenging, *Space* is one of Baxter's best.

Brian Stableford's novel *Year Zero* (Sarob Science Fiction & Fantasy, £22.50) is a fix-up of three stories originally published in *Interzone* under the byline "Francis Amery" and a considerable amount of new material, all ingeniously dovetailed together to form an episodic, talkative but fast-paced narrative.

Its resourceful heroine, Molly, decides at the beginning of 2000, a whole year before the calendrical start of the new millennium, that she will treat it as year zero, that "she would refuse point blank to be Y2K compliant, and would instead use whatever opportunities year zero provided to make a fresh start and turn her life around." Molly is a single mother and recovering drug addict who lives in a bed & breakfast in Brixton, and wants nothing more than to get her two daughters back from foster-parents, but her New Year's resolution takes her into very strange territory indeed. She encounters Elvis and a fallen angel, is abducted by aliens and interrogated by men in black, kidnapped by fairies and experimented on by a mad scientist, must try and make a new home on the demon-infested 13th floor of a high-rise, and finds that she is the lynch-pin of the Devil's plan to precipitate an Apocalypse of Evil at the end of the year and so begin a Mil-

lennium of Malevolence.

Stableford rips through a dozen staple tropes of pulp sci-fi and fantasy with relish and a good deal of sly, dry wit, knitting them into an ingeniously fantastically satirical, crammed with plots within plots and double- and triple-bluffing, never once, as this kind of thing can all too easily do, slips into silliness. Molly is a feisty heroine, able to pierce the monomaniacal bubbles of her foes with the common sense and clear-eyed intelligence of a streetwise Candide, and soon proving to be far less ordinary than she first seemed (aside from the fact that she is fearfully loquacious, engaging all she meets in elegantly constructed argument), yet never losing the sharp sense of her earthy, everyday normality. Tremendously enjoyable, thought-provoking stuff that sparkles with the intensity of its own invention.

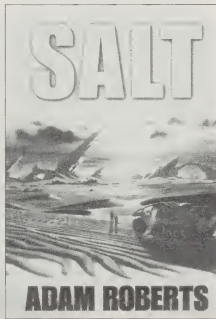
S*alt* (Gollancz, £16.99), the first novel by new writer Adam Roberts, is a bleak, gritty interplanetary fable, its deceptively simple story full of traps and reversals. The eponymous planet on which it's set is barely habitable, despite some hasty terraforming, a vast desert of salt dunes and desert with just three tiny, salty seas, the atmosphere tinged with chlorine, and little life beyond some primitive algae and crystalline salt grasses. Eleven disparate groups of colonists arrive in a string of ships which shelter behind a comet's core for the interstellar journey, and set up their cities. But one group, the Senaarians, militarized free-market fundamentalists, immediately pick a fight with a group of anarchists, the Alists. During the voyage, Senaarian men visiting the anarchists' ship fathered some 21 children; their leader demands custody,

and because the Alists are unable to understand, much less comply, a swift, dirty war begins.

Although *Salt's* publishers are keen to compare it to Frank Herbert's *Dune*, a more obvious model is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, and its didactic contrast between the rich capitalist motherworld, Urras, and the impoverished anarchist colony on the moon, Annars. As with the Annarists, the Alists organize their labour by rota – even if the Alists' rotas are computerized – and all possessions are held in common, although the Alist society, with its insistence on individual freedom over collective responsibility, is considerably less attractive than that of the Annarists, where ordinary human relationships, which the Alists consider a strange sickness, are possible. Moreover, despite the similar dialectic, the structure and trajectory of Roberts's novel is quite different from that of *The Dispossessed*.

The story is told in alternating sections by two men: Barlei, vain and endlessly self-justifying, who seized the leadership of the Senaarians in a coup; and Petja Szerelm, one of the anarchists. Roberts nicely contrasts Barlei's transparent bluster with Petja's bewildered decency, and wrings some fine black comedy from the mutual incomprehension between the two groups. The escalation from misunderstanding to war is finely handled, as is Petja's transition from everyman to guerrilla leader. Roberts has a tendency to overegg his metaphors and his science is pretty wobbly: stars aren't made out of sodium; DNA molecules don't contain amines; you can't make a planet's atmosphere breathable by dumping a single lump of (presumably frozen) oxygen onto the surface, especially not a lump small enough to have been towed 20-odd light years. But his evocation of *Salt's* bleak landscapes is elegant and evocative, and his narrative is knotty and sophisticated: as it unfolds, a moment of violence makes it clear that Petja, several times accused of being a heirach and a rigidist by his fellow Alists, and who by his own admission joined the group late in life, isn't quite the typical Alist he seems to be. This powerful and cleverly enigmatic crux suggests, but does not insist, that the war may not be simply a result of Barlei's scheming, but of a *folie à deux*. Neither side is blameless; the moral shading is subtler than blunt schematic didacticism; the tragedy all the deeper. *Salt* is a strong debut, and an affecting, effective novel.

T*ime's Hammers* (Toxic Press, £9.99), conflating two previous collections with a generous salting of new work, delivers just one shy of 50 of



James Sallis's short stories. The first part memorializes the time when "thirty years ago, for about ten minutes" Sallis, at one time editor of *New Worlds* magazine, was a fully-fledged sf writer. There's the interplanetary trip-tych of "Letter to a Young Poet," "Faces, Hands" and "The History Makers," the sharp satire of "At the Fitting Shop" and "Breakfast with Ralph," the

dislocated fables of "Front&Centaur," "Driving," and the achingly beautiful "A Few Last Words." Triangulate Delany, Disch and M. John Harrison, infuse with the sensibility of the *avant-garde*: that's the territory Sallis formerly inhabited. These days, he's best known for his Lew Griffin thrillers, and many of the pieces in the second half of the collection are playfully skewed

takes on tropes from the hard-boiled crime genre. But whether sf, thriller, or mainstream, all of Sallis's stories are lapidary miniatures shaped by the same wry sensibility, strung taut by elision of the crucial detail and resonant with the quiet despair and dignity of ordinary lives, word-perfect postcards from the edge.

Paul J. McAuley

Kim Newman's *Where the Bodies are Buried* (Alchemy Press, £17.50) is a short fix-up novel based on the familiar idea (going back to Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt") of the border between entertainment and reality becoming blurred, and at last collapsing. As usual on such occasions, the entertainment is rather grim, being a film series featuring a monstrous serial killer of supernatural powers. What lends this book its richness (and justifies its length), is the parallel evolution of the interpenetration of fantasy and reality, and of the media in which the fantasy is rendered. At the start of Part I it's plain video; by Part IV it's total-immersion, interactive VR – a phrase we all understand, signifying a technology none of us has experienced, and which would have been Greek to me when I first started writing for *Interzone*.

And to the story? As has been common on these occasions since Jacobean times, it's a tale of revenge for a genuine wrong, taken to lunatic extremes. Robert Hackwill, a corrupt local politician, bullied Allan Keyes, the writer of the original screenplay, when they were both schoolboys. Keyes having chosen Hackwill's name for the serial killer, Hackwill (being suggestible) gradually takes on the lineaments and adopts the lifestyle of the monster. Not that Keyes has it all his own way; as his scripts in other genres come to command ever huger fees, he nonetheless finds himself impelled to write yet more Hackwill sequels, and the resulting product is always different for him than for anyone else.

Nor is the interpenetration all one way. Reality invades fantasy, as sundry nutters take to murder in the Hackwill mode, leading to a reshuffle of the familiar argument between producers and would-be censors. That is no less than usual a dialogue of the deaf, and by Part IV no one has any clear idea of which reality ought to be accorded primacy, let alone who originated where. On the other hand, somewhere there's a killer to be brought (somewhere) to book. It's ingenious, stylish and great fun.

Some books are difficult because of the complexity and/or multiplicity of the ideas and/or characters; some, because of the manner of presentation. In the case of John Hyatt's *Navi-*

Different Orders of Fun

Chris Gilmore

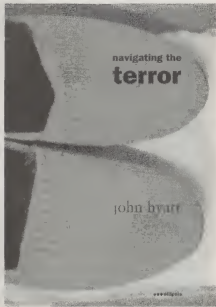
navigating the Terror (Ellipse, £10 or \$15) it's all five. It's a small book, 4" x 5.75", but the printer has managed to cram 30 lines to the page, despite generous top and bottom margins. Perhaps needless to say, the side margins are generous as well but the central gutter is meagre, and the binding stiff. Altogether, a mess.

This is a pity, as the text, while not

really about anything much, is fun, and in a vein similar to (though more complex than) Newman's. The central conceit is a program called AISCARP (for Artificially Intelligent Self-Curating Art Robot Project) which is getting up to all sorts of mischief in both the virtual (Data) and the real world. Since a lot of the characters are uploaded and enhanced human personalities, who tend to be snobbish about the real world and its unhappily limited inhabitants, the distinction is of little moment. Moreover, since the structure of the book (if such it can be called) is fractal, presenting a constant flow of new characters almost to the last page, it offers the reader little prospect of anything ever being resolved on any level, let alone all – and less reason to worry about whether it will be. As for whether anything described is actually happening, and if so, whether the character it's happening to is who he thinks he is – read on, but don't expect enlightenment.

A few motifs ("plotlines" would be too strong a word), if they fail to impose order, at least mitigate the chaos. For reasons which may have passed me when I blinked at the eye-watering print, someone has chosen to kidnap the upload of John Holliday, gung-ho secret agent, now deceased. His flesh-and-blood clone, Roman Holliday (who has understandably been brought up under the less preposterous name of Roman Dee) plus sundry, and variously enhanced, downloads of his own, want him back. And that's it, really. The rest is ornamentation, all of a monstrously self-indulgent kind.

On the other hand... while Hyatt is shamelessly and hopelessly in love with his own cleverness, that cleverness is obviously of a very high order. I take a certain pride in my own IQ, but it leaves me comfortably outside the top 0.001% of my species; I got a few of the jokes, but am not a part of his intended audience, which I suspect consists of Greg Egan and John Clute. Gentlemen, I implore you: buy one (and a magnifying glass) each! It will offer hours of fun, and something to chat about by e-mail. The rest of us can reflect that even Jove nods. The expression "talking 19 to the dozen" for talking very fast goes back to c. 1850. Someone, sometime, must have hit a zero instead of a nine, producing



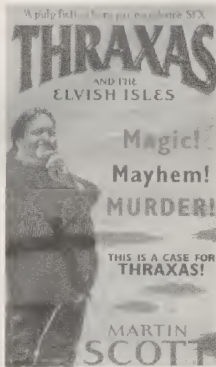


"ten to the dozen" with the same (though it ought to be the opposite) meaning, and Hyatt has followed him. In proper humility, take comfort therefrom; and as for you, Hyatt: "Remember, thou art mortal" – at least *pro tem* – and good wishes for your uploading, as and when.

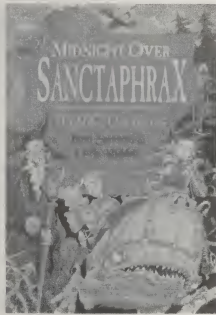
It's an enduring cliché of *Sword & Sorcery* that though the covers frequently feature improbably constructed young women, scantily but impractically clad and brandishing lethal weapons, the text (once you start reading) proves to be little concerned with them and their adventures. I mention this because a major character in Martin Scott's *Thraxas and the Elvish Isles* (Orbit, £5.99) is an enviably endowed young lady called Makri, who for professional reasons is prone to attend social events wearing only an exiguous chainmail bikini, and is good with the broadsword. So who's on the cover, then, and filling most of it? Thraxas himself, that's who – an obesely epicene young man (so sparse is his beard, he'd pass for Andrea Dworkin in a dim light), fully clad (*Gott sieh danke!*), his pudgy features fictively set off with a lank ponytail and an oddly smug expression. That'll bring in the punters – and maybe provide material for an article in *Precision Marketing*.

The story itself is a comedy thriller, depending for its effects largely on studied incongruity. Thraxas has no interest in Makri, having relinquished sex in favour of drinking, gambling and the pleasures of the table (hence his shape, which isn't any kind of political statement). On the other hand, he's working as an S&S avatar of Sam Spade (with overtones of Mike Hammer and sundry ambulance-chasing shysters, as in his world the role of Private Eye overlaps that of defending counsel). Nor has he any interest beyond the professional in his client, a sylphlike elvish maiden accused (falsely, of course) of major sacrilege, who manages to get framed for murder while allegedly on custodial remand therefor. There's a subplot involving Makri's improbable method of converting a frail 13-year-old into a killing machine, a couple of red herrings, and that's about it, really.

I'm not entirely happy with Scott's continuous use of the historic present, and he overdoes the litotes; but this is a pleasantly undemanding read, especially after Hyatt, and reminiscent of the more evanescent works of Sprague de Camp. As such, good for medium-haul flights; I doubt it will ever rate a reprinting, but just in case... Haven't Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell a rather good line in covers for this sort of thing?



I reviewed Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell's *Beyond the Deepwoods* glowingly in *Interzone* 139, and since then Paul Brazier has been almost as enthusiastic about the second *Edge Chronicle*, *Stormchaser*. The latest, *Midnight Over Sanctaphrax* (Doubleday, £10.99) sees the youthful but ambitious Twig at last master and owner of a spanking new skyship of his own, and once again in search of his father, who disappeared into a storm in the second book. He finds him fast enough, but loses him (permanently, this time – I think), together with his memory of the incident and his lovely new ship, in short order. The rest of the book is mainly taken up with Twig's new, self-



imposed quest: to reassemble his crew, who have been scattered in various states of distress from end to end of the Edge. He also needs to repair the gap in his memory, which contains information vital to the survival of the whole of the Edge world.

As before, Stewart's descriptions of corrupt and disgusting goings-on are brilliantly visualized; also as before, Riddell's line drawings are exquisitely detailed and notably grotesque. Moreover, though he has taken to including some of the vertiginous perspectives usually associated with the more intellectually pretentious American comics and retro *film noir* this book has a lot more going for it. First, and most obviously, the world of the Edge is gaining in depth as its limits are defined. It isn't a notably magical world, just one where the laws of nature are less staid than the ones we know. Thus there's a variety of materials that exhibit negative gravity, variably according to such mensurable scalars as mass and temperature; the familiar magical influences of sympathy, contagion and recurrence are there to be noted, and (sometimes) controlled, or at least made predictable; and Stewart is making some headway into the desperately difficult field of Edge economics.

This enrichment of the background doesn't swamp his excellent development of character. Twig has had huge responsibilities prematurely forced upon him, and there are times when the response they have evoked overwhelm his common sense. Moreover (and rather unsettlingly at first) halfway through the book Stewart introduces Cowlquape, a parallel (and even more youthful) hero, who takes over as the principal third-person viewpoint. This allows us to see Twig through new eyes, and the vision doesn't disappoint. Stewart also does what so many writers of juveniles flinch from: he kills off sympathetic characters now and then when the dynamics of the plot demand it. Once one realizes that he's doing this, it adds immeasurably to the suspense of his plotting. Finally, he leaves some interesting teasers for the next volume. Twig has had a lot on his mind recently, but when he's going to realize that his Stone Pilot is very attractive, and seriously in need of affection? When is the curious sympathetic glow which affects (or afflicts) those who have penetrated the terrible vortex going to be explained? What has befallen the benevolent caterbird?

I can't wait to find out. Altogether, this series is so exceptional that if I had any chance of collecting, I'd bet good money on it still being in print a century from now. As it is, I'm reluctant to pick small nits, but the reviewer has his duty.

So, Paul: as you clearly don't know

how to conjugate the verbs to lay and to lie, please sub-contract the job to someone who can; it requires talents of a far lower order than your own, but that is no reason not to get it right. *Pace* a moron of semi-literate primary-school teachers, don't use "their" when the proper form is either "his" (the masculine embracing the feminine) or (when gender is an issue)

"his or her." (Singular is not the same as plural, geddit?) Also, never use the word "chairperson" in your narrative. (It can be used in dialogue to indicate that the speaker is a complete gonk, though this is rather a crude play; you can probably think of better.)

So, Chris: I love pictures of belying sails, and you render catenary curves beautifully; but in future, can you

please try to ensure that the wind blows steadily from just one quarter at a time? And that the direction of the pennons is not entirely divorced therefrom? It will make it that much easier to sympathize with the difficulties of the steersman.

Now, both of you: When's the next book coming?

Chris Gilmore

Will Self's new novel, *How the Dead Live* (Bloomsbury, £15.99) is everything that plenty of us have been waiting for from the author. My prior opinion, expressed in these pages, was that Will Self happened to be a better short-story writer than novelist; but, as might be expected with this man – a writer who has built a career on contradictions – there were greater reserves ready. Although I was sporadically impressed and eventually disappointed with the previous novel, *Great Apes*, I loved *Cock and Bull* (two novellas) and *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys* (stories) and *Junk Mail* (essays and interviews). But what I've wanted is evidence of Self's ability as a novelist.

Now it's arrived. Self has panel-beaten some of the dents out of his past, and *How the Dead Live* is the after-deathbed memoirs of an American woman who dies of cancer.

Exhibiting Self's tendency to cage fantasy in sarcastic and surrealistic cloaks, this is a book of exceptional flair and beauty. Where in the past (in the novels) I'd been unimpressed by the gurgling strains of extended metaphors and the copious riffing, in *How the Dead Live* there has obviously been a maturing of the talent, a refining. Although the language is as dazzling as ever, the whole book seems more thorough, and more vigorous in the execution. As Lily contemplates her past life – her mistakes, her children ("After David was born, in 1948, I was claustrophobic; after Charlotte was born ten years later I was agoraphobic. But after Natasha was born in 1961 I couldn't stay in or go outside. I would stand in the back doorway, the baby in my arms, wavering between the awful non-alternatives"), her affairs – she also examines what is to come. Which is this: a "pottering" eternity, quite possibly in the company of an Aborigine who is to escort her across the River Styx, and her own extinguished child...

But Self's work is not concerned with lachrymosity; and nothing the author does would be complete without humour. For while the genius for apocalyptic images has never been in doubt, neither has Self's talent for comic underslippage. On being told, for example, that as she has developed an irrational fear of being buried alive, the fading lady states: "Wow,

Palimpsests and Panel-Beatings

David Mathew

taphophobia. And I'd thought dead was the great phobia-eradicator; now I discover that I'm to be irrationally fearful – even as I die." It is comedy in the blackest strokes; presumably, for the narrator, it is therapeutic. "Memo for Another Lifetime," it is written elsewhere: "never buy more postcards than you're going to send, no matter how attractive the pictures are..." And



half a paragraph on we have: "Letters – why keep letters? Do I want to read letters now? Do I fuck."

Similarly recommended, in this month of high watermarks, is M. John Harrison's new collection, *Travel Arrangements* (Gollancz, £9.99). As any of this author's long-term readers will know, there is so much going on in one of Harrison's paragraphs that the idea of palimpsest occurs. It really is as if there are stories scribbled over the rubbed-out tales underneath. There are layers and layers and layers. He's quite remarkable.

Throughout these tales, too, there are lines and sequences that seem aptly to describe the author himself. For example, from "Old Women": "In those days he made you feel that some revelation was imminent, something that had little to do with our social conscience, or even our society, something about being human that it was intolerable for us, in this century, not to know." Or from "Anima": "Any attempt to bring the whole of him into view produced a constant sense of strain, as your brain fought to equalise the different focal lengths."

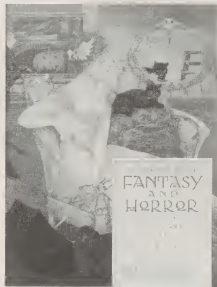
Because these fantasies defy short-handed parenthesis, numbered quotation is what the reviewer is frequently reduced to. But in this collection of chronologically arranged stories (14 in all, the earliest being from 1983), there are stringent explorations of the human condition – and occasional glimpses of a humour that is Bible-black. "I had to use a mirror," a character confesses on how he managed to drive an axe into his own face. "I kept swinging it in the wrong direction... And they call it the easy way out." And all his companion can offer in reply is: "Well I'm not coming to lunch with you like that." M. John Harrison is astonishing writer, and *Travel Arrangements* a deft and dextrous collection.

As is *The Year's Best Fantasy and A Horror: Thirteenth Annual Collection* (St Martin's Griffin, \$17.95 or £29.95), edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling.

Unless you specifically detest all imaginative writing (and if so, more's the pity and more fool you, and why on earth are you reading this magazine?), it would be hard to have only

bad things to say about a genre anthology that purports to be a "best of." It would be unusual, after all, for an editor to choose the worst pickings – to choose an entire volume of worthlessness and guff. You must like *something*. And even with collections of brand-new material, it would take a particularly bullheaded stance for a reader to declare that he hates everything; and this notwithstanding the occasions on which a new fat anthology is systematically slated – when one begins to suspect that decisions have been made on grounds other than those of sober literary judgement. An anthology is an editor's compromise: it is work that the editor enjoys (and therefore hopes that the readers will also appreciate), but at the same time the editor must have one eye on the till... By securing (by broad consent) a "year's best" – or a "best of" at any rate – the way, financially, is paved a little bit smoother for forthcoming projects, which will also bear the anthologist's stamp, or have that person's feel: both of which should be distinctive, should they not? After all, the collections we remember are those that hang together as collections, as teams, rather than being strangers at a very awkward party.

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Thirteenth Annual Collection is as ever a sturdy project: 514 pages of quality, fiction, non-fiction and poetry. There are plenty of stories from blockbuster collections such as 999 (edited by Al Sarrantonio, this book is needlessly and, it seems, jealously put down in an otherwise excellent "Summation 1999: Horror" by Datlow) and from *White of the Moon*, and other books that I had enjoyed reading. My favourite pieces, really, were the ones I hadn't seen before. Ian R. MacLeod's "The Chop Girl," for example, is an interesting and well-written tale about a most unfortunate young woman: unfortunate for other people, that is. As she puts it, "I was the petaled heart of death, its living embodiment. I was quivering with it like electricity." And Kent Meyers's "The Smell of Deer" is just sublime; I was spellbound. And just, momentarily, to even the balance, I was spellbound in an entirely negative fashion by Robert Girardi's "The Dinner Party," which is less a story than a string of halfwitted clichés, and which I can't believe was published, let alone chosen for such auspicious surroundings: but there you go. If the following can be read without a weary sneer appearing on your face, then fair enough: "The same aquiline profile and startling blue eyes. I was not surprised to see her. This time she wore a black evening gown that exposed her breasts. Her shoulders were smooth and muscular, her breasts splendid,



nipples teased into a state of perpetual excitement... Her black hair, streaked attractively with blue to match her eyes, curled cleverly around her ears." (Curled cleverly?)

The only reason I mention this story is to explain that no anthology can be uniformly to anyone's taste, and that compromises, however small, however insignificant, must also be made by the reader. There is more than enough in this book to entertain any reader of our beloved genres, and I wish the editors well with the project.

Reading Patrick McGrath is like tuning into a station that you used to play all the time but then forgot that you ever knew. It is like discovering a song at the end of a cassette – a song that you only vaguely remember recording. There is something about the author's narratives – the sweating ambition, the

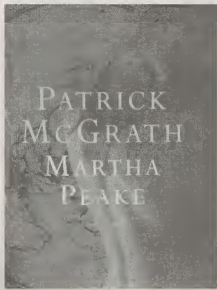
seething gothic microcosms – that convinces the reader that some beautifully executed *homage* is underway. But you never quite find out to whom. Though the plots might fan out, contract or congest, the language is pure melodrama; it is a capella, bumptious, and it booms through rain and storm.

Martha Peake (Viking, £12.99) is my favourite of his books to date – and this despite the fact that it raises its dukes against some stiff opposition. It might not share the off-the-wall quality of narrative voice in, say, "The Boot's Tale" or "The E/rotic Potato," but those kinds of experiments fritter their quirkiness if repeated. Instead McGrath writes, as before, in the human first person. Like the previous novels (*The Grotesque*, *Spider*, *Dr Haggard's Disease*, *Asylum*) and the collection of stories entitled *Blood and Water*, *Martha Peake* is a study in loudmouthed elegance, with its share of misdemeanours and its hinted allegation as to the dubious reliability of any narrator. (Furthermore, the title continues a pseudo-trend of McGrath's: that of compounding plot expectation through the exploitation of a surname. There is certainly something vivid, rugged and windswept about that "Peake.")

The narrator is listening to his uncle tell a story – and we know enough about McGrath's ability to wrongfoot the reader to understand that the uncle might not be telling the whole truth; but then neither might our closest ally, the nephew, be scrupulously honest either. (The nephew suspects the uncle of drug-taking.) The story told is that of Harry Peake, a scallywag, poet, a smuggler, a family man, an alcoholic; and that of his eponymous daughter, who stands by him even after his inebriated behaviour has caused a family disaster and the death of his wife. Not that Harry emerges unscathed from the blaze: he is wounded and, this being the 18th century, he is inadequately rebuilt and develops a sizeable hunch.

This deformity Peake uses as a means of making a living; he displays it to freakshow-hungry bar-room crowds, thereby simultaneously paying penance for his sins by allowing himself to be dragged so low. However, the debasement does not end there; although Martha does her best to keep him away from drink... where there's a will there's a way – and gin demands more attention than kin. Gin sends him into foul tempers, and worse: there is one spectacularly horrific attack on the girl herself...

Reputation becomes Peake's shadow. A rich nobleman wishes to own the distorted spine... but what does he have in mind for the girl, who by now is becoming a woman? The past, Martha decides, needs once and for all



to be cauterized – to stop it bleeding into the present and causing unwashable days. But sins beget sins, and all around are dark reminders of their bygones. The only option, it becomes clear, is to journey to America – to road-test the future, and to watch the struggles for independence and revolution up close. To step into a destiny that solidifies around her, either protectively or threateningly. And to learn how to breathe younger air. By the end of the novel, with conventions having been tipped upside-down, the author

has shown us just how varied and original a writer he can be.

In Brief:

Richard Laymon's *The Travelling Vampire Show* (Headline, £17.99) flies no flags for originality, but it is encouraging to see a major house behind an unapologetically horror novel. Although Laymon's work might be tidily executed, bracing, brash and breezy, slight and sleazy (with this book helped by the fact that the narrator is relating a time from his teenage

years), there is not much in the way of a forward movement for the genre. And there is no good reason, really, why there should be: having made his bed, Laymon is going to lie in it, relieved, perhaps, by the faith that Headline have in him.

The Travelling Vampire Show is true to form. In fact, it is one of those novels that simply comes along every once in a while, in a fashion that apes the very subject matter. It is fun, competent, a day's heart-race from start to finish.

David Mathew

Reading Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling* (Harcourt, \$24) the first new novel in her "Hainish" sequence in 25 years, and her first novel of any sort in a decade, is an act of cautious reverence. That Le Guin should undertake a project of the same sort as her greatest works, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974), is long overdue, and so immensely encouraging; but there is simultaneously a deep doubt that the spontaneous shimmering felicity of the earlier books can ever be recaptured, that the attempt should even be made. But it has been made; and the news is mixed. *The Telling* is graceful, entrancing, at times authentically enlightening; but it is also philosophically arid, curiously unimaginative, perhaps (and if so, numbingly) solipsistic.

Omens of *The Telling* have been plentiful since 1990. Le Guin has in that time produced 13 novellas and short stories located in the Hainish universe, and some of these have accumulated into what amount to episodic novels. The three "churten" tales, forming the bulk of the collection *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (1994), make up one such sequence; the five novellas set on Werel and Yeowe, a quartet of which make up *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995), possess a strong continuity of place and argument. *Four Ways* faithfully replicates the formula limned by *The Left Hand of Darkness*, bringing diplomatic and anthropological observers from the benign far-flung Ekumen of human worlds to a divided and turbulent planetary system struggling on the brink of ethical maturity; and the "churten" trilogy fruitfully continues the rhetorical strategy of *The Dispossessed*, stressing an absolute linkage of improvements in space travel and communications technology with the perfection of human community. So the late Le Guin retains much of the wisdom and limpid narrative facility of her extraordinary authorial youth; her pellucid humane Taoism still informs and enriches texts of elegant grave simplicity and symmetry. That she is closely repeating early successes is worrying, as is an increasing

Caves of Being

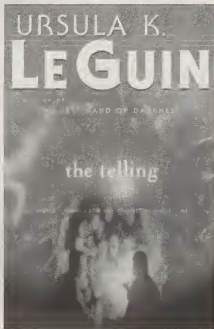
Nick Gevers

reliance on linear romantic clichés; but she is a formidable Teller of Tales still, and her new book is her fullest Telling in a long time.

The Telling is from the start an obviously didactic fiction. Although set

mainly in the fairly far future on a fairly distant planet, its actual focus is clear from that planet's name, Aka (AKA, Also Known As, well, Earth; the late Hainish stories abound in such direct associations of other worlds with our own: Werel, world, our world; O, both fictional utopian "nothing" and the orb we inhabit; Segri, with its topical segregation of the sexes). From Le Guin, didacticism is expected, and, when suitably restrained and modulated, supplies her robust narrative backbone. The intellectual schema shaping *The Telling* is certainly intriguing, a persuasive contemporary commentary: a young woman grows up on a future Earth governed by tyrannical religious fundamentalists, wilful destroyers of all alternative pasts and avengers of any future democratic diversity; she must then, as an Ekumenical Observer on Aka, confront a regime of secular fundamentalists, equally averse to their annihilation of inconvenient subversive histories and equally determined to direct their planet's destiny in every way. Satty Dass is obliged to recognize in the Akan Corporate State her own progressive secular ideology, taken to a stifling totalitarian extreme by the very hatred of religion that she, a victim and relative of victims of theocracy, naturally entertains; and, in helping moderate the severity of the Corporation's rule, she must comprehend its hateful fundamentalism enough to manipulate and reorient it. Openness, humility, and flexibility are Satty's only routes to true knowledge of Aka and of her own proper role in its affairs; these she learns, in a graphic demonstration of the virtuous receptivity advocated by Taoism here and now.

So far, so good: Le Guin voices, with quite compelling urgency, a path to candid self-appraisal and right action in an unjust world. Aka is like China during the Cultural Revolution and like China now: fanatical ideological purists, stamping out every suspected deviancy, enforce a rigid optimism and absolute work ethic in the name of state capitalism and relentless economic growth. Satty finds in the

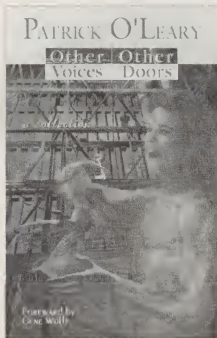




mountain country a version of Chinese-occupied Tibet, passively resisting the Corporate dispensation through a quiet insistence on the values and verities the State has displaced: holistic communality, avoidance of usurious profit, the altruistic sharing of all expertise, the slow cumulative Telling of the world by all its inhabitants through story and ritual. The regime bans books and contemplative ways of thought; the "maz" of the countryside preserve them. Satty, making a pilgrimage to secret "caves full of being" in the high mountains, achieves personal balance at last, and is able to conceive of the right action that may save all the lore of the Telling from the regime's tender mercies. There is considerable edification to be derived from this sustained lyrical disquisition; it is imparted with great and passionate skill, which is very well. But...

But *The Telling* is also disconcertingly like one of its own caves of being, a monotonous echo chamber. Of its characters, only Satty has life and solidity; all others, her Ekumenical superior, the maz she meets during her journeyings, the Corporate bureaucrat she calls the Monitor (her philosophical sparring partner for much of the novel), are thematic pawns only, mouthpieces for largely static elements of Le Guin's thesis. That thesis is worthy, but it is essentially private, a monologue, a one-character revelation, tested hardly at all through the medium of open debate. Le Guin asserts much, but proves little; her story is almost totally devoid of event, more of which might have sparked some genuine dialogue. Consider: Le Guin advocates, without allowing proper reply, a social model in the form of the Telling, organic, yes, inclusive, timeless, relaxed, yes, but like the Tibetan Buddhist regime that the Communists toppled, essentially theocratic, dependent for guidance on tradition and a sort of lumpen consensus. It is an idyll of a sentimentally conservative kind, really, summed up by its central feature of ordinary rank-and-file "yoz" listening attentively to interminable recitations of archaic wisdom by the "maz." When asserting her views, Le Guin should acknowledge that in the opinion of many such a dispensation would be a rut, a bore, an abnegation not to be borne; in order not to be a bore herself, Le Guin must come face to face with her opposition and contend with it honestly and practically. Until then, novels like *The Telling* will stand simply as examples of evasion at its most elegant.

A different spirit animates Patrick O'Leary's first collection, *Other Voices, Other Doors* (Fairwood



Press, \$17.99). Here, the emphasis is very much on a multiplicity of voices and ways of being, the restless obliqueness of their presentation a diametrical contrast with the comfort of the sermon. O'Leary, the author of the odd articulate novels *Door Number Three* (1995) and *The Gift* (1997), demonstrates a comprehensive command of loaded dialogue, offbeat argument, and sheer narrative surprise in the eight stories, nine Meditations,

sundry selected poems, and occasional fragments assembled in *Other Voices*, making it probably the most unorthodox, and unorthodoxly invigorating, collection of the year. That Gene Wolfe writes the Foreword, and is celebrated in one of O'Leary's Meditations as the greatest living author, is a mark of this book's quirky brilliance.

Stories on offer here are: "Bat Boy," with its startling eloquent epiphany; "The Maker of Miniatures," an effusive discussion of loss balancing gain; "Ding, Ding, Ding—A Christmas Story," a superbly heartening Yuletide puzzle; "Before and After," which does more to redeem smut than one might reasonably think possible; "The Problem Phone," which hints at the utopia lurking in telephone networks; "We Are All Together," a memorable reflection on the contingency of history, even of John Lennon; "Brand Equity," a quite novel take on the mechanics of economic monopoly; and "23 Skidoo," an outrageous surreal exploration of identity slippage, perhaps involving O'Leary himself. Some of the Meditations verge on fiction too, as O'Leary speculates on the "right-wing conspiracy" against Bill Clinton, and responds with vernacular venom to a bad review. And there is the secret history behind *Door Number Three*, and much much more.

Other Voices, Other Doors is potent, outspoken, uninged. Very well worth reading. And not a cave in sight.

Nickjevres

Get a Life

Tim Robins

You may be familiar with Neil Gaiman, the gothic-chic cartoon: raven hair, black leather jacket and drainpipe denims. Indeed, Gaiman's glittering career as a comic-book writer could be a testament to the power of the well-posed publicity photograph. On the other hand, it could be a testament to a talented author's ability to combine journalistic research with a romantic imagination and create some of the most alluring comic-book stories to be published in the last decade.

Those unfamiliar with Sandman, a spandex-wearing superhero re-visioned by Gaiman as Morpheus, Lord of The Dreaming, would do well to buy one of the "graphic novels" that reprinted sequences of the character's

75-issue comic book. *Fables and Reflections* (Titan Books), a short-story collection, is a good taster. It would also help to have a copy of Hy Bender's *The Sandman Companion: A Dreamer's Guide to the Award-Winning Comics Series* (Vertigo Books, \$19.95) at hand to guide you through the labyrinth of textual references, in-jokes, allegories and continuity points.

Bender's book summarizes *The Sandman's* plots, interprets their themes and supplies an interview with Gaiman, who comments on all aspects of his creative practice. There are also snippets from the artists who have worked on the series, although Dave McKean, whose atmospheric collage covers added to the comics' dis-

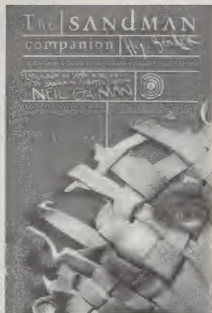
tinctiveness on the news-stand, seems to have been held in reserve. But the book is not just a commemoration of a loved character, it is also a reminder of the pleasures and frustrations of the comic-book industry. The 1980s and '90s saw mainstream comics grow up, although I still feel a little too much of *The Sandman* was set in the realms of the schoolboy swot: Tolkienesque fairy kingdoms, Roman and Greek myths, Bible stories and Shakespeare, all overlaid with a pre-"A" Level, gothic sulk. Nevertheless, when comics were good, *The Sandman* was among the best.

Of course, Bender's book is also part of the mini Sandman industry of decorative ornaments, action figures, book-ends (yours for \$125) and assorted memorabilia. To this end, it is available in a glossily expensive hardcover which can add respectability to your bookshelves while beguiling you with capitalism's own very special magic – the enchantment of the commodity form. The book's content struggles to live up to the packaging. The plot summaries are hermetic and convoluted, but that is because comic-book stories are hermetic and convoluted. The interview with Gaiman is thorough and book-length, but is the kind of material better priced in a magazine like *The Comics Journal*.

However, *The Sandman Companion* is thought-provoking company.

It is interesting to read how Gaiman developed his stories and built on his characters, often with little sense of their eventual fates. The book also gave me a chance to revisit my favourite Sandman story sequence, *A Game of You* (Titan Books, £9.99). I was pleased to learn this is also Gaiman's favourite story, but surprised that it is least popular among readers. A pity. The story, reprinted with an introduction by Samuel R. Delany, is a fascinating exploration of the relationship between stories, memory and identity. Gaiman dramatizes the way men and women are included and excluded from different types of narrative and how even our most private dreams are made from public materials. To simplify, we are free to dream, to remember and to be, but the materials from which we choose our dreams, our memories and ourselves are not entirely of our own making and may even be making us.

Interviewed by Bender, Gaiman says *"Sandman"* was always designed to move from male stories to female stories." Given this bipolar structure, it is not surprising that Wanda, a pre-op transsexual with a fear of surgery and a key figure in *A Game of You*, is not just marginalized, but is ruthlessly written out of the series. Wanda spends much of the story looking for narratives that will include him/her. She/he



recalls identifying with the comic-book adventures of the "Weirdzoz," crazy-paved, reverse-logic caricatures of Hyperman and his friends. The Weirdzoz are clearly based on the Bizarros, actual characters from the *Superman* series, but, as Gaiman explains, "some of DC's *Superman* people caught sight of the story and wouldn't green-light it. Therefore, I simply changed a few names around: Superman became Hyperman, Lois Lane became Lila Lake, and Bizarros became Weirdzoz." This is ironic. Wanda cannot even find a place in the comic company for which she was created.

Apparently, the power of stories to shape reality is also a recurring concern of Discworld's creator and Lord of Misrule, Terry Pratchett. I learnt this from David Langford's foreword to *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (Science Fiction Foundation, £10), a collection of academic articles about Discworld and related environs edited by Andrew M. Butler, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Much as I enjoy Pratchett's Discworld stories, the title of Butler *et al*'s book sent me running to the court of appeal. However, the twelve pieces, mostly written by members of the Science Fiction Foundation or the Association for Research in Popular Fictions, offer a persuasive case for Pratchett to be taken seriously as a literary figure. Of course academia is a jury that never delivers a final verdict.

The book is a meeting of two enthusiasms: for academia and for genre fiction. A number of chapters make this connection explicit. Andy Sawyer, administrator of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection at the University of Liverpool Library, uses a discussion of Discworld's own librarian, a "small, sad" orangutan, to explore the cultural significance of libraries and

librarianship. Penelope Hill, an English graduate from the University of York, connects life at Ankh-Morpork's Unseen University with university politicking in fact and fiction.

Two pieces in the collection have been revised from material printed elsewhere: a version of John Clute's "Coming of Age" first saw print in *Interzone* and Andrew M. Butler's "Theories of Humour" appeared in *Foundation*. Of all the contributors Clute most explicitly locates Pratchett within a literary tradition, comparing him to other writers of fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien (of course) and E. R. Eddison, whose *The Worm Ouroboros* must represent the longest build-up to a punch line in the history of comedy. Butler's chapter shows how different theories of humour can be used to make sense of Pratchett's own comedy stylings.

Entirely new contributions to Pratchett scholarship are provided by academics such as Edward James, who focuses on issues of racism in the five Discworld novels foregrounding the City Watch. Farah Mendlesohn, questions whether Pratchett's novels offer a coherent ethical world-view. The answer is yes, but it is, to say the least, distinctly conservative.

For me, the book also raises some pretty fundamental questions about how popular fiction should be understood. David Langford details the tortuous attempts to validate Pratchett's work in the eyes of the British Council, here cast as the bastion of literary respectability. The editors clearly don't want Pratchett to gain academic recognition on just any terms. I empathize with their feelings. Works of science fiction and fantasy have been largely excluded from the literary canon.

As the Science Fiction Foundation continues to extend its reach into areas of popular fiction (the first book in this series was *The Parliament of Dreams: Conferring on Babylon 5*), it may need to consider more radical questions. These include: what constitutes literature? How applicable are literary criteria to popular forms of entertainment such as film and television? How desirable is it to discriminate between such works on the basis of literary qualities? Answering such questions may help overcome a palpable uneasiness about the Foundation Studies' intended readership. The editorial team's self-nomination for *Private Eye*'s "Pseudos' Corner" seemed unnecessarily defensive, as did David Langford's quasi-parodic suggestions for chapter headings, for example "Granny Weatherwax: Exemplar of Post-Pre-Feminist Political Discourse, or Just Plain Ornerly?"

There is of course an unreasonable expectation that work about comedy

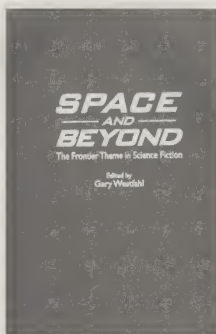


should itself be funny. In fact the articles collected here strive for my favourite academic comedy genre – slapstick. The best academic slapstick places you in a familiar world then pulls the rug from under your feet. So, faced with a statement such as “map references which are built into the secondary worlds of fantasy use the codes of scientific objectivity to present precisely that which science cannot guarantee or secure on its own terms” you can either remain floored or, like me, rise to the occasion. And it is worth the effort.

Matthew Hills, author of the above sentence, opens up a fascinating range of issues about the function of the map in the fantasy genre. He set me thinking about the way different maps not only locate fantasy realms in different places and times, but also establish help a novel’s relationship to the genre of fantasy itself. For me, part of the excitement of Robert E. Howard’s Hyborea was its supposedly historical location, whereas Tolkien’s Middle-earth (its name notwithstanding) seemed tediously positioned somewhere between the bottom of my garden and Dingley Dell.

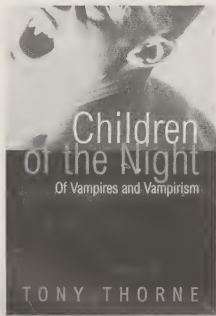
The pleasures of mapping imagined worlds are inextricably linked to all-too-real histories of colonialization. The colonial imagination has national inflections. In Britain, colonialization and the dreams of science fiction didn’t just meet in the mind of H. G. Wells. Cecil Rhodes, an actual colonialist and “founder” of the former Rhodesia admitted that he dreamt of colonizing the planets. How the colonial imagination has worked its way into American sf is less clear, but it’s one of the issues that niggles at the edges of *Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction* (Greenwood Press, \$59.95), a collection of academic articles and other material edited by Gary Westfahl.

Contributor Patrice Caldwell argues that sf’s treatment of the alien in first-contact stories rehearses the way we deal with power and, in particular the power relations between us and people defined as “other.” Many of the essays are provocative, particularly David Pringle’s carefully argued exploration of the sub-genre of Space Opera. I assumed that Space Opera was America’s answer to colonial adventuring, but of all the science fiction sub-genres the Planetary Romance probably best fits that bill. Pringle argues that Space Opera is akin to the sea story. Certainly, interplanetary warfare can be seen as analogous to warring nation states. However, in a final “twist,” he goes on to argue that Space Opera is derived in part from satirical adventures such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and should there-



fore be regarded as an intellectual enterprise, a genre characterized as much by discussion of ideas as by images of spaceships hurling themselves across the void. Provocative stuff, but typical of this interesting collection.

Lee Kovacs provides a similar service with his analysis of romantic ghost stories produced by Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. His book, *The Haunted Screen: Ghosts in Literature and Film* (McFarland, \$32.50), examines, among others, *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* (the basis of *Randall and Hopkirk [Deceased]*) as well as more recent offerings such as *Ghost* – which he argues is but a shade of its predecessors). The passage of time has not been kind to the ghost story, and



Kovacs suggests that this is because in the modern chaotic world we too have become shades of our former selves – images lacking substance.

Meanwhile, in the alternate universe of 1960s television, writer Steve Cox reminds us that American sitcoms weren’t always witty, urbane takes on the flat-sharing lives of the professional classes. Instead, they were *I Dream of Jeannie*, or versions of it. Cox’s *Dreaming of Jeannie: TV’s Primetime in a Bottle* (St Martin’s Griffin, \$15.99) has no illusions about its subject matter. As the author points out, the sitcom wasn’t all that funny, never won an industry award and none of its five seasons entered the top-25 ratings in the USA. His book is the scrapbook you never had for a programme you were never too fussed about watching.

Cox suggests that what continued appeal *I Dream of Jeannie* may have is due to two factors: nostalgia and escapism. Except most 1960s American sitcoms were a kind of trap. Whether the housewife was a genie, a witch or a just a red-haired hot-head, it was clear that no matter what mischief they caused during the day, every room in the house would be thoroughly vacuumed, dusted and polished before their husbands came home at night. Ironically, and probably not coincidentally, America’s suburban sitcoms suggested domestic bliss was the natural order of things at a time when that order was being challenged by a pill-popping, LSD-dropping counterculture. Nostalgia indeed.

At least *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters* were slightly subversive. Just the sight of a family of ghouls imperfectly living out the American Dream was enough to raise profound questions about domestic life. Tony Thorne’s thorough and well-written *Children of the Night: Of Vampires and Vampirism* (Gollancz, £18.99) helps explain the transgressive appeal of such programmes in his account of the vampire from ancient folk story to *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*, which is not a long journey.

Vampirism has some fairly obvious attractions: smart clothes, aristocratic overtones and smouldering sexuality. The sexual frisson of sharing blood is discussed in Thorne’s many interviews with “members of the vampire community” (sic) in America and Europe. These acolytes provide fascinating accounts of blood-sharing and lives spent in semi-darkness. At last I began to understand some of the appeal of gothic gloom that motivates blood-suckers and readers of *The Sandman* alike. At least vampires are one group of fans that can legitimately be told to get a life.

Tim Robins

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Aldiss, Brian. Non-Stop. "SF Masterworks, 33." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-998-8, 241pp, B-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1958; Aldiss's debut novel, and still regarded as one of his best; this edition has been slightly revised.) 14th September 2000.

Anderson, Poul. Operation Luna. Tor, ISBN 0-812-58027-3, 438pp, A-format paperback, cover by Julie Bell, £6.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; "the long-awaited sequel to *Operation Chaos*," set in a modern-day world where magic exists; like its predecessor of 30 years ago, it's a peculiarly "pure" example of the mixed science-fantasy form – pentacles and spacecraft rub shoulders in the second paragraph; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 147.) September 2000.

Barker, Clive. The Essential Clive Barker: Selected Fictions. Foreword by Armistead Maupin. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651468-5, xiv+618pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Horror/fantasy collection, first published in the UK, 1999; it contains various selections from his early story-collections *The Books of Blood* and from later novels and plays up to and including *Galilee* [1998]; the most surprising element here is the elegant two-page foreword by well-known mainstream novelist Armistead Maupin; "I can think of no other writer who writes so generously about everyone's passion, whether hetero-, homo- or omni-, rough sex or gentle," states Maupin; "all are acceptable in Barker's dominion.") 2nd October 2000.

Bertin, Joanne. Dragon & Phoenix. Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-02939-8, 540pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; sequel to *The Last Dragonlord*.) 16th October 2000.

Blaylock, James P. Thirteen Phantasms. Edgewood Press [PO Box 380264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA], ISBN 0-9701306-0-0, 256pp, hardcover, \$25. (Fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; this volume of 16 tales, his first proper collection, appears to contain all the author's significant short fiction to date, including the award-winning "Paper Dragons" [1986] and others which have appeared as independent chapbooks, and ranging to the comparatively recent title story, "Thirteen Phantasms" [1996], and "The Old Curiosity Shop" [1998]; most first appeared in original anthologies or in magazines such as *Asimov's*, *Omni* and *F&SF*.) November 2000.

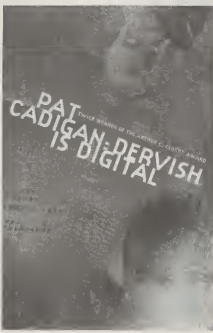
Blish, James. A Case of Conscience. Introduction by Greg Bear. Del Rey/Imprint, ISBN 0-345-43835-3, ix+242pp, trade paperback, \$12. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1958; a Hugo Award-winner in 1959 and probably Blish's finest novel; if you only ever read one Blish book, this is the one to go for.) 5th September 2000.

Bresman, Jonathan. The Art of Star Wars: Episode I, The Phantom Menace. Del Rey/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-345-43109-X, viii+216pp, very large-format paperback, \$22.95. (Sf movie art portfolio, first published in the USA, 1999; a lavish study of the modelling and storyboard art behind George Lucas's blockbusting film, it features more than 600 pieces of artwork; a hardcover edition, publication date unclear, is available in Britain from Ebury Press [Random House], priced at £25.) 5th September 2000.

Brooks, Terry. Angel Fire East. "Book Three of The Word and the Void." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-970-9, 440pp, A-format paperback, cover by Brom, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; third in the "urban fantasy" trilogy which began with *Running with the Demon* and *A Knight of the Word*; the overall title, "The Word and the Void," seems to be newly introduced with this edition.) 5th October 2000.

Bunch, Chris, and Allan Cole. Sten 2: The Wolf Worlds. "Over one million Sten books sold worldwide." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-008-3, 298pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1984; second in this rather old paperback-original space-opera series, now making its first appearance in Britain.) 5th October 2000.

Cadigan, Pat. Dervish is Digital. "Twice winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award." 2



Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-77953-3, 230pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; a follow-up to the author's *Tea from an Empty Cup* [1999], concerning the further adventures of policewoman Dore Kunstan in a TechnoCrime, Artificial Reality-dominated future.) 20th October 2000.

Cadigan, Pat. Mindplayers. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07136-2, 276pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987; Cadigan's debut novel, which gave her the reputation [at that time] of being the one-and-only female writer of cyberpunk.) 28th September 2000.

Cady, Jack. The American Writer: Shaping a Nation's Mind. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-26709-6, 372pp, trade paperback, cover by David Johnson, \$15.95. (Critical study of American writing by a U.S. author who has written horror fiction; first published in the USA, 1999; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 151.) 2nd September 2000.

Carroll, Jonathan. The Land of Laughs. "Fantasy Masterworks, 9." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-999-6, 241pp, B-format paperback, cover by Joe del Tufo, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1980; a long-overdue reissue of Carroll's excellent debut novel, which the blurb describes as "his most unequivocal fantasy.") 14th September 2000.

Chadbourne, Mark. Darkest Hour: Book Two of The Age of Misrule. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06903-1, 471pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; second of a "dark fantasy" series which may be tilted towards the horror end of the scale; according to the accom-



parrying publicity sheet, there should be a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £16.99, but there's no indication of that in the book itself.) 19th October 2000.

Chadbourne, Mark. *World's End: Book One of The Age of Misrule*. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-980-5, viii+557pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999.) 14th September 2000.

Chinn, Mike, ed. *Swords Against the Millennium*. Illustrated by various hands. Alchemy Press/Saladoth Productions [46 Oxford Rd., Acocles Green, Birmingham B27 6DT], ISBN 0-9532260-3-4, 180pp, small-press paperback, cover by Bob Covington, £9.95. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed, limited hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; appropriately and unashamedly dedicated to the memories of REH, ERB and Fritz Leiber, it contains an all-British line-up of new sword-and-sorcery tales – by Cherith Baldry, Adrian Cole, Pauline Dugate, Anne Gay, Joel Lane, Paul Lewis, Chris Morgan, Stan Nicholls and Lissanne Norman [astonishingly, her first-ever British publication, although she has had six novels published by DAW Books in the USA] – plus two reprints, by Ramsey Campbell and Simon R. Green.) September 2000.

Clement, Hal. *The Essential Hal Clement, Volume 3: Variations on a Theme by Sir Isaac Newton*. Edited by Mark L. Olson and Anthony R. Lewis. Introduction by David Langford. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701, USA], ISBN 1-886778-08-6, 465pp, hardcover, cover by Richard McKenna, \$25. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains all the "Mesklin" novels and stories – *Mission of Gravity* [1953], *Star Light* [1970], "Lecture Demonstration" [1973] and the very recent "Under" [2000], plus the author's non-fiction piece "Whirligig World" [Astounding SF, June 1953] and afterwords by the two editors; "Hal Clement" is the pseudonym of Harry C. Stubbs [born 1922]; recommended to lovers of hard sf.) September 2000.

Cooper, Louise. *The Spiral Garden*. Illustrated by Clive Sandall. Introduction by Diana Wynne Jones. British Fantasy Society [c/o 3 Tamworth Close, Lower Earley, Reading, Berks, RG6 4EQ], ISBN 0-9524153-7-2, 117pp, small-press paperback, cover by Sandall, £5.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition; there is a near-simultaneous limited hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; the first collection by one of Britain's more prolific, but undersung, fantasy novelists, it contains five stories, two of which first appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, another two of which appeared in original anthologies, and the fifth of which, "St Gumper's Feast," is original here; there is also a useful two-page bibliography at the rear which lists Cooper's more than 50 books, including the early romances that appeared under pseudonyms – "Eliza-

beth Hann" and "Anna Stanton.") Late entry: August publication, received in September 2000.

Davenport, Roger. *Ortho's Brood*. "Mutant Point Horror." Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-99637-6, 222pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Lea, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition.) 15th September 2000.

De Camp, L. Sprague, and Fletcher Pratt. *The Compleat Enchanter*. "Fantasy Masterworks, 10." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-757-8, £3.99, B-format paperback, cover by Edd Cartier, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first published in this form in the UK as *The Intrepid Enchanter*, 1988 [this edition, however, drops the foreword by Catherine Crook de Camp which appeared in the 1988 volume]; it consists of the five "Magical Misadventures of Harold Shea," originally published in the USA as three books – *The Incomplete Enchanter* [1941], *The Castle of Iron* [1950] and *The Wall of Serpents* [1960]; light, frothy stuff; as we said of the recent Robert E. Howard "Conan" volume in the same series, this is perhaps the most attractive repackaging of these old pulp stories yet in paperback form.) 12th October 2000.

Delamere, David. *Mermaids and Magic Shows: The Paintings of David Delamere*. Text by Nigel Suckling. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85028-249-8, 128pp, large-format paperback, cover by Delamere, £14.99. (Fantasy art portfolio, first published in the UK, 1994; a good selection of the imaginative but perhaps over-slick work of this British-born artist who lives in America; this is one of a number of older books reissued as Paper Tiger trade paperbacks in the same month – others, at the same £14.99 price, include *In Search of Forever* by Rodney Matthews and *Lightship* by Jim Burns; also, in thinner volumes priced at £12.99, *The Boris Vallejo Portfolio* and *The Julie Bell Portfolio*.) September 2000.

Dick, Philip K. *Three Early Novels*. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-912-0, 422pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition in this form; it contains the short novels *The Man Who Japed*, *Dr Futurity* and *Vulcan's Hammer*, originally published separately in the USA as halves of *Ace Doubles* in 1956, 1960 and 1960; minor stuff, but nevertheless a must-have volume for Dick completists, it comes with Terry Gilliam's cover commendation: "For everyone lost in the endlessly multiplying realities of the modern world, remember: Philip K. Dick got their first.") 14th December 2000.

Dicks, Terrance. *Endgame*. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53822-8, 243pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, this one seems to be set during the Cold War on our familiar Earth, and features such real-life spies as Burgess, Maclean and Philby.) 6th November 2000.

Drake, David. *Servant of the Dragon*. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-950-3, 612pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; third in the trilogy which began with *Lord of the Isles* [1997] and *Queen of Demons* [1999].) 12th October 2000.

Elliott, Kate. *Child of Flame: Volume Four of Crown of Stars*. DAW, ISBN 0-86677-892-1, xii+850pp, hardcover, cover by Jody A. Lee, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Kate Elliott" [or Katrina Elliott, as it says in the copyright statement] is a pseudonym of Alis A. Rasmussen; DAW seem to have resumed sending us review copies after a long hiatus: this is their "DAW Book Collectors No. 1164.") October 2000.

Ferman, Edward L., and Gordon Van Gelder, eds. *The Best from Fantasy & Science Fiction: The Fiftieth Anniversary Anthology*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86974-6, 381pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1999; a celebration for one of the best American magazines, *FS&SF*; despite its subtitle, though, this anthology consists only of stories reprinted from the magazine's past five years or so [earlier material would have been over-familiar]; authors include Terry Bisson, Michael Blumlein, Ray Bradbury, John Crowley, Bradley Denton, Paul Di Filippo, Harlan Ellison, Esther M. Friesner, Elizabeth Hand, Tanith Lee, Ursula Le Guin, Maureen F. McHugh, Rachel Pollack, Robert Reed, Bruce Sterling, Kate Wilhelm and Gene Wolfe, among others; recommended.) 13th October 2000.

Fischer, Dennis. *Science Fiction Film Directors, 1895-1998*. McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0740-9, viii+759pp, hardcover, \$175 [USA], £157.50 [UK]. (Lightly illustrated A-Z of sf movie directors: first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; it's described as "a companion volume to the author's *Horror Film Directors, 1931-1990*" [a book which came out in 1992 and which we didn't see]; from Irwin Allen to Robert Zemeckis, all the major [and many of the minor] names are here; this is another very big, text-heavy work from McFarland, with double-columned pages crammed with copious narrative of each director's career and description of the films; recommended.) In the USA, November 2000; in the UK, 23rd November 2000.

Goonan, Kathleen Ann. *Crescent City Rhapsody*. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-888-4, 564pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gregory Bridges, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; like the author's earlier novels, it concerns nanotechnology; Greys Bear and Benford praise it on the cover, as do such worthies as Pat Cadigan and Joe Haldeman.) 14th September 2000.

Grant, Rob. **Colony**. Viking, ISBN 0-670-88965-2, 290pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £14.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; the second solo novel [following *Backwoods* – which sold 220,000 copies in the UK alone, the Penguin people kindly tell us] by the co-creator of the sf TV sitcom *Red Dwarf*; it seems to be set aboard a generation starship.) 30th November 2000.

Green, Simon R. **Beyond the Blue Moon**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07045-5, 395pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £16.99 [not seen]; belated sequel to *Blue Moon Rising*.) 28th September 2000.

Green, Simon R. **Blue Moon Rising**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-987-2, 448pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* SS.) 12th October 2000.

Haining, Peter, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Haunted House Stories**. Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-160-4, xiv+S76pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/ghost-story anthology, first edition; it contains about 35 reprint stories, including work by Joan Aiken, E. F. Benson, Algernon Blackwood, Robert Bloch, Ramsey Campbell, A. E. Coppard, Conan Doyle, Ellen Glasgow, L. P. Hartley, W. F. Harvey, James Herbert, William Hope Hodgson, Richard Hughes, W. W. Jacobs, M. R. James, Nigel Kneale, Sheridan Le Fanu, Penelope Lively, Nora Lofts, Bulwer Lytton, Ruth Rendell, Charlotte Riddell, Hugh Walpole, Ian Watson, Fay Weldon and Virginia Woolf; as ever, Haining goes mainly for familiar big names, but in doing so he also manages to disinter some quite rare old stories; there's a six-page appendix in which he lists and briefly describes a few dozen haunted-house novels.) 5th October 2000.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Circus of the Damned: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-048-2, 329pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; third in the crime/dark fantasy series which apparently has become quite a bestseller in America.) 5th October 2000.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **The Lunatic Café: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-049-0, 369pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; fourth in the crime/dark fantasy series.) 5th October 2000.

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Confederation Handbook**. "A vital guide to the 'Night's Dawn Trilogy'." Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-78588-6, vi+231pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £12.99. (Companion to the author's huge space-opera trilogy, first edition; it con-

tains entries for the people, places, things and pseudo-scientific concepts in Hamilton's opus; it's a testament to the popularity of the author's novels that such a "handbook" has been published.) 6th October 2000.

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Naked God: Book Three of the Night's Dawn Trilogy**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-35145-1, 1256pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £7.99. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 1999; Hamilton's famous whopper, the final doorstop of three, completing well over 3,000 pages of adventuresome, mystically-tinged space opera; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 150.) 6th October 2000.

Harris, Anne. **Accidental Creatures**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87560-6, 286pp, trade paperback, £14.95. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1998; "winner of the first Spectrum Award for best SF featuring gay characters, themes, and issues"; on a biotech theme, this is a second novel by an American writer whose first was called *The Nature of Smoke* [1996].) 11th October 2000.

Harrison, Harry. **A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07134-6, 192pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Alternate-world sf novel, first published in the USA as *Tunnel Through the Deepes*, 1972; an amusing "proto-steampunk" vision of a 19th-century world in which Britain never lost its American colonies.) 28th September 2000.

Harrison, Harry. **West of Eden**. Illustrated by Bill Sanderson. Simon & Schuster/books, ISBN 0-7434-0013-5, xii+483pp, trade paperback, cover by Douglas Henderson, £9.99. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 1984; a reissue of another of Harrison's best – first in the "Eden" trilogy, about an alternate world populated by intelligent dinosaurs; this edition con-

tains a new two-page introduction by the author.) 17th September 2000.

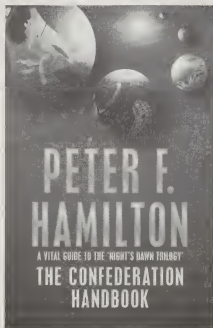
Herter, David. **Ceres Storm**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87493-6, 253pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (SF novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new American author, it's described as "a blast of colourful sf adventure, in the pyrotechnic tradition of Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*.") November 2000.

Kerr, Katharine. **The Fire Dragon: Book Three of The Dragon Mage**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224645-7, 352pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; follow-up to *The Red Wyvern* [1997] and *The Black Raven* [1999].) 2nd October 2000.

King, Stephen. **On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-76996-3, xv+238pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £16.99. (Memoir-cum-writing manual, first published in the USA, 2000; the first half of the book is heavily autobiographical and makes gripping reading; the second half consists of tips about writing, petering out into a list of the author's favourite books of recent years.) 3rd October 2000.

Kramer, Edward E., ed. **Strange Attraction**. "Stories and Artwork based on the Sculptures of Lisa Snellings." Introduction by Harlan Ellison. Shadowlands Press. [Bereshith Publishing, PO Box 2366, Centerville, VA 20122, USA], ISBN 1-930595-00-X, 445pp, hardcover, cover by Snellings, \$29.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; there are near-simultaneous signed "deluxe" and limited editions, priced at \$275 and \$75 [not seen]; it contains all-new stories by Michael Bishop, Edward Bryant, Nancy A. Collins, Peter Crowther, Jack Dann & Janeen Webb, Charles de Lint, Neil Gaiman, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Brad Linaweaver, Robert J. Sawyer, Darrell Schweitzer, John Shirley, S. P. Somtow, Chet Williamson, David Niall Wilson, Gene Wolfe and a few others, plus a poem by Ray Bradbury, and a piece by the inspirational sculptress herself, Lisa Snellings, photographs of whose odd, dark, disturbing, carnivalesque creations illustrate the book throughout.) Late entry: August publication, received in September 2000.

Long, Jeff. **The Descent**. Orion, ISBN 1-85798-929-5, 561pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (SF/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1999; reviewed in *Interzone* 149 by Chris Gilmore, who didn't much like it, but commended in this paperback reprint by M. John Harrison [gosh; they must be climbing buddies], James Lovegrove, Peter Crowther, etc.; the author has written three previous mountaineering thrillers, and one of them, *Angel of Light*, inspired the Sylvester Stallone movie *Cliffhanger*; this one, which opens in the Himalayas, involves the discovery of a vast underground realm there [shades of Berkeley





Grey's fondly-remembered (by some of us) boys' book, *The Lost World of Everest* (1941); Jeff Long lives in Boulder, Colorado, but we remarked of the first edition that he has the British habit of excessive use of "said-bookisms" in the dialogue lines: "'Gibberish,' snapped Owen, badly spooked. 'Bible talk,' like sympathized. 'No it's not,' piped up Kora.") 14th September 2000.

Lovegrove, James. **The Foreigners.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06894-9, 421pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (SF novel, first edition; this 34-year-old British author's third major novel – not counting collaborations, not counting juveniles, not counting paperback-original quickies written as "J. M. H. Lovegrove"; it looks interesting; a small part of an early version of it originally appeared as a short story in *Interzone* ["Giving and Taking," issue 104.] 28th September 2000.

Luceno, James. **Jedi Eclipse: Agents of Chaos II.** "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-941024-9, 348pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (SF movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2000; it seems Arrow Books [Random House UK] have now picked up on the Del Rey/Lucas Books Star Wars franchise in Britain – presumably we'll be seeing no more of these books from Transworld/Bantam.) 12th October 2000.

McAuley, Paul J. **Shrine of Stars: The Third Book of Confluence.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-981-3, 313pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 1999; reviewed, approvingly, by David Mathew in *Interzone* 152.) 14th September 2000.

Mark, Jan. **The Eclipse of the Century.** Scholastic/Point, ISBN 0-439-01482-4, 442pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Juvenile SF novel, first published in the UK, 1999; by one of the more distinguished British children's authors, it was shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction Award in 1999; it's dedicated to Ursula Le Guin – and Philip Pullman commends it on the front cover: "read it and be amazed.") 20th October 2000.

Matthews, Andrew. **Dissolvers.** "Mutant Point Horror." Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-99638-4, 189pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Lea, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition.) 15th September 2000.

Miéville, China. **King Rat.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-89072-9, 319pp, trade paperback, cover by Cliff Nielsen, \$14.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1998; the debut novel by China Miéville [born circa 1973], it has been widely praised by such powerful names as Ramsey Campbell, M. John Harrison, Michael Moorcock and Iain Sinclair; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 141.) 12th October 2000.

Moers, Walter. **The 13 Lives of Captain Bluebear: Being the Demibiography of a Seagoing Bear, with numerous illustrations...** Translated by Alan Brownjohn. Secker & Warburg, ISBN 0-436-27500-7, 703pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £18. (Illustrated fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1999; this is the first translation into English; Walter Moers [born 1957] is "a celebrated illustrator, cartoonist and novelist" who lives in Hamburg; the blurb describes the novel as combining "the fantasy of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Neverending Story* with the humour of *Baron Munchausen*"; it has sold over 250,000 hardcover copies in Germany.) 12th October 2000.

Moorcock, Michael, and Storm Constantine. **Silverheart.** "A Novel of the Multiverse." Earthlight, ISBN 0-684-86670-6, 408pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous C-format paperback edition priced at £10; from the blurb: "Michael Moorcock and Storm Constantine have combined their talents to produce a novel which is both surreal and gothic, with characters both sympathetic and grand guignol.") 20th November 2000.

Mór, Caiseal. **The Water of Life: Book Three of The Wanderers.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03730-7, 542pp, A-format paperback, cover by the author, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1997; the UK release of this one follows fairly soon after the first, *The Circle and the Cross* [Earthlight, 15th May 2000] and the second, *The Song of the Earth* [Earthlight, 7th July 2000]; befitting the Australian author's Irish name, it's Celtic, Druidic stuff.) 16th October 2000.

Nicholls, Stan. **Legion of Thunder: Orcs, First Blood, Book 2.** Millennium, 1-85798-560-5, 281pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 152.) 14th September 2000.

Parker, K. J. **The Proof House: Volume Three of the Fencer Trilogy.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-018-0, 602pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; "the spellbinding epic fantasy of war, intrigue and magic reaches its triumphant conclusion.") 5th October 2000.

Pohl, Frederik, and C. M. Kornbluth. **Wolfbane.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07135-4, 189pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1959; this is the revised edition – revised by Pohl *solus*, since Kornbluth was long deceased – of 1986.) 28th September 2000.

Pope, Nick. **Operation Lightning Strike.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-684-85161-X, ix+292pp, C-format paperback, £10. (SF ufological thriller, first edition; a follow-up to

the author's *Operation Thunder Child* [see below.]) 2nd October 2000.

Pope, Nick. **Operation Thunder Child.** Pocket, ISBN 0-671-01835-3, xii+292pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Ufological thriller, first published in the UK, 1999; more "mainstream" SF, this one is a debut novel by a British UFO expert who worked for the Ministry of Defence for 15 years; he is the author of two previous "non-fiction" books.) 2nd October 2000.

Pratchett, Terry. **The Fifth Elephant.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14616-1, 460pp, A-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; the 24th "Discworld" novel, it features "dwarfs, diplomacy, intrigue and big lumps of fat"; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 150.) 9th November 2000.

Pullman, Philip. **The Amber Spyglass.** "His Dark Materials III." Scholastic/David Fickling Books, ISBN 0-590-54244-3, 550pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the conclusion of the highly-praised trilogy, following *Northern Lights* [1995; also known as *The Golden Compass*] and *The Subtle Knife* [1997], this one has been hugely awaited – it's the second-biggest event in recent fantasy-publishing after this year's "Harry Potter" novel; rumour has it that it would have been out before now if the author had not withdrawn his submitted manuscript for reworking; in a brief "Acknowledgments" afterword he says, "I have stolen ideas from every book I have ever read"; reviewed by John Clute in this issue of *Interzone*.) 1st November 2000.

Rankin, Robert. **Sex and Drugs and Sausage Rolls.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14741-9, 382pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Alexander based on a sculpture by the author, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; another outing in the loose "Brentford" sequence; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 154.) 12th October 2000.

Rankin, Robert. **Waiting for Godalming.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-60057-7, 246pp, hardcover, cover by John Alexander based on a sculpture by the author, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; in which, "God is dead. He died in mysterious circumstances while on a fishing trip to Norfolk, leaving a wife, three children and a great deal of valuable property.") 12th October 2000.

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **Flightless Falcon.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-57507-077-3, xii+323pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; it appears to be a stand-alone fantasy [thus far, anyway] – i.e. not part of her "Renshai" series; "Mickey Zucker Reichert" is the form of her name used by American doctor and writer Miriam S. Zucker.) 19th October 2000.



Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **The Last of the Renshai**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-152-9, 534pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reissue of the what was, despite its title, the first in the author's "Renshai" series.) 12th October 2000.

Royle, Nicholas, ed. **The Time Out Book of London Short Stories, Volume 2**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-029623-9, x+339pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Mainstream anthology with considerable fantastic content; first edition; one of a series which Royle has edited on behalf of Time Out magazine, it follows *The Time Out Book of New York Short Stories* [1998] and *The Time Out Book of Paris Short Stories* [1999]; like previous volumes it contains some original stories by authors associated with the sf and fantasy fields – in this case Christopher Fowler, Christopher Kenworthy, Paul J. McAuley, Michael Moorcock and Kim Newman; the remaining contributors include, among others, Maureen Freely, Esther Freud, Stewart Home, Toby Litt, Russell Celyn Jones, Geoff Nicholson, Chris Petit, Michèle Roberts, Iain Sinclair, Conrad Williams and Elizabeth Young.) 26th October 2000.

Russell, Eric Frank. **Major Ingredients: The Selected Short Stories of Eric Frank Russell**. Edited by Rick Katz. Introduction by Jack L. Chalker. Afterword by Mike Resnick. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701, USA], ISBN 1-886778-10-8, 702pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$29. (SF collection, first edition; it contains 30 entertaining stories by the Liverpudlian author [1905-1978] who was the most "Campbellian" of all sf writers from Britain – i.e. he was a mainstay of John W. Campbell's *Astounding SF* in the 1940s and 1950s [all bar five of the tales here come from that magazine], and is still remembered fondly by many for his ingenuity and humour; another commendable NESFA volume.) September 2000.

Salvatore, R. A. **The Demon Apostle**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-923-6, x+524pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; third in the trilogy which began with *The Demon Awakens* [1998] and *The Demon Spirit* [1998].) 14th September 2000.

Siegel, Jan. **The Dragon-Charmer**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225837-4, 325pp, hardcover, cover by the John Howe, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to *Prospero's Children* [1999], set a dozen years later; "Jan Siegel" is a pseudonym of Amanda Hemingway [born 1955], who wrote the sf novel *Psyche* [1982].) November 2000.

Stanley, John. **Creature Features: The Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Movie Guide**. Updated Edition. Berkley

Boulevard, ISBN 0-425-17517-0, xii+596pp, trade paperback, \$12. (A-Z sf-fantasy-horror movie guide, first edition of this update; the previous (fifth) edition appeared in 1997 – and, although the publishers don't make it explicit, this seems to be the sixth; it's arranged in the time-honoured fashion of the wider-ranging movie reference books by Leslie Halliwell, Leonard Maltin, etc, with star-ratings for each film; a useful tome, reasonably priced.) Late entry: August publication, received in September 2000.

Sterling, Bruce. **Distraction**. "Winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award" Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-928-7, 489pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1999 [it states "1998" inside, but surely that's wrong?]; reviewed, with high praise, by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 152.) 8th September 2000.

Stewart, Paul, and Chris Riddell. **Midnight Over Sanctaphrax: Book 3 of The Edge Chronicles**. Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-60089-5, 368pp, hardcover, cover by Riddell, £10.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Beyond the Deepwoods* [1998] and *Stormchaser* [1999]; like the earlier volumes, it is attractively illustrated throughout with line-drawings by Riddell; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in this issue of *Interzone*.) 5th October 2000.

Stewart, Paul, and Chris Riddell. **Stormchaser: Book 2 of The Edge Chronicles**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-54628-3, 394pp, B-format paperback, cover by Riddell, £4.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; reviewed favourably by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 152.) 5th October 2000.

Topping, Keith. **The King of Terror**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53802-3, 279pp, A-

format paperback, £5.99. (SF TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Fifth Doctor, Tegan, Turlough, the Brigadier and UNIT.) 6th November 2000.

Watson, Ian. **The Embedding**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07133-8, 254pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 1973; Watson's well-known debut novel, it still packs an imaginative punch.) 28th September 2000.

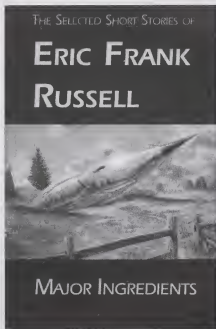
Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **Night of Madness**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87368-9, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "the long-awaited return to the magical world of Ethshair.") November 2000.

Whiteland, David. **Book of Pages**. Ringpull Press [c/o Signature Book Representation Ltd, 2 Little Peter St, Manchester M15 4PS], ISBN 1-903376-00-9, 64pp [but single-sided, i.e. 128pp], large-format paperback, £9.99. (Illustrated sf/fantasy fable, a sort of graphic novel but without speech balloons; first edition; it concerns a young monk who is sent from his mountain monastery to the Metropolis; the author-artist, David Whiteland, was born in 1966, and this quirky black-and-white illustrated text is his debut book; it also represents an unexpected comeback for the Ringpull publishing imprint [Stephen Powell Books Ltd], famous for discovering Jeff Noon.) September 2000.

Wolfe, Gene. **On Blue's Waters: Volume One of The Book of the Short Sun**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87257-7, 381pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1999; first part of a trilogy which is itself a follow-up to the tetralogy "The Book of the Long Sun"; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 151; Michael Swanwick is quoted on the back cover of this edition, stating that "Gene Wolfe is the greatest writer in the English language alive today. Let me repeat that: Gene Wolfe is the greatest writer in the English language alive today!") 11th September 2000.

Yarbo, Chelsea Quinn. **Come Twilight: A Novel of Saint-Germain**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87330-1, 479pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Historical horror novel, first edition; latest in the non-chronological "Comte de Saint-Germain" vampire series which has been running for over 20 years now; this one opens in seventh-century Spain.) 13th October 2000.

Yarbo, Chelsea Quinn. **Communion Blood: A Novel of Saint-Germain**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86794-8, 477pp, trade paperback, \$16.95. (Historical horror novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the "Saint-Germain" series seems to go on forever, and the books are big [Yarbo has become the Harry Turtledove of vampire fiction]; this one is set in 17th-century Italy.) 13th October 2000.





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